

Leave of Absence

Tuesday, January 23, 2001

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, January, 23, 2001

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS

[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, I received correspondence from the Member for Tobago West (Mr. S. Callender) requesting leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. Such leave has been granted.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj): Mr. Speaker, the hon. Prime Minister would be making a statement. I respectfully ask that this matter be deferred until later in the proceedings.

Agreed to.

FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT

[Second Day]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [January 22, 2001]:

Be it resolved that this House adopt the First Report (2001 Session) of the Finance Committee of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on proposals for the Expenditure from the Public Revenue which were not included in the Annual Estimates, 1999/2000.
[*Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming*]

Question again proposed.

Mr. Speaker: Hon. Members, the Minister of Education was on her feet so she may continue.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar: Mr. Speaker, I joined this debate yesterday to give support to the Motion which is before this honourable House with respect to the variation of appropriation.

Mr. Speaker, you will recall yesterday that the Member for Diego Martin West had spent a lot of time accusing the Member for Tunapuna of being a liar and of telling untruths to the Parliament. You will recall that he had indicated that the hon. Member for Tunapuna, in giving responses with respect to moneys paid to farmers, had untruthfully told the Parliament that moneys had been given to Paramin. You will also recall that on page 12 of the document which the Minister of Finance had circulated to every Member of this honourable House it was clearly stated that Paramin benefited from moneys paid to farmers in the fiscal year 1999/2000 and that figure was upward of \$97,000. I was saying that it was the strategy of the Opposition to target a Member and keep repeating an allegation against that Member in the hope that what was being said would stick and we saw that on two occasions yesterday, when the hon. Member for Tunapuna was accused, by the Opposition, of telling untruths to the Parliament. In that one incident it was very clear that the document which is before the House, and is the subject of part of the debate, clearly shows that the Minister had spoken the truth in his contribution to the Parliament yesterday.

Mr. Speaker, we indicated that they had also accused him of telling untruths when he spoke of the moneys that were spent when the then Prime Minister, now Leader of the Opposition, had travelled to Haiti. As far as we understood the Member for San Fernando East, the Member for Diego Martin West and the Member for Laventille East/Morvant said that the hon. Member for Tunapuna was telling an untruth when he said that \$1 million was spent when they travelled to Haiti at the time when the Member for San Fernando East was Prime Minister.

Again, they did not listen, or they did not understand, because the Member had indicated very clearly that they chartered a plane and they went to Haiti which cost \$1 million. The Member got up and said, "No, it was \$70,000 for chartering the plane", but the Member for Tunapuna had said that it was the trip. They chartered a plane and they went and the total cost, he indicated, was \$1 million. That is the strategy of saying something that would stick, forever repeating the same thing.

As I said, we were like déjà vu in that session of the Parliament, where we were hearing repetitions of accusations and allegations of corruption. We heard those allegations of corruption for the past five years. They campaigned with the allegations of corruption with the hope that if they said it often enough it would stick, but fortunately the people of this country were far smarter than they ever thought. That is why they sit on that side of the House and, as I said, we sit on this side. They could not fool the people with the allegations.

What was more important, Mr. Speaker, was the whole issue of process and procedure that the Member for Diego Martin West spoke about. The Member talked about following the correct procedure and process. He said we needed to follow the correct processes and if we had done that the former Member for Pointe-a-Pierre would not have been before the court. If only we had listened to them. “I told you so” he said. He repeated it on more than one occasion.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is worthy of repeating that it is the first time in the history of this country, under this Government—a UNC Government—that an official of that standing has been brought to answer charges before the court. It never happened in all the years under the PNM. It never happened. It took a UNC Government, and it was because we gave a commitment in 1995. We said those who do the crime will do the time. It is the UNC Government that put it into law, right here in this Parliament. There were several pieces of legislation to show where our commitment was, that we were concerned about justice, integrity, transparency and accountability. You will recall, Mr. Speaker, that it was the Member for Laventille East/Morvant who talked about Prevatt and O’Halloran clearly when he was speaking about corruption. No one on this side mentioned anything about that. No one reminded him about that. It was as if his conscience was bothering him. He was the one who got up and spoke about Prevatt and O’Halloran. In all those years of allegations of corruption never once in this country was an official or government minister brought to answer charges before a court on the basis of fraud and corruption. It is only under this Government.

Mr. Speaker, there is more. They throw their allegations of corruption but those allegations have been there over the years. The question remains: What did they do in order to address that? The hon. Attorney General reminded me that since 1976 it had been pointed out that there should be an integrity commission. Between 1976 and 1986 nothing happened under the then PNM. It took an NAR government during 1986—1991 to set up an integrity commission. Thereafter, it took a UNC Government, 1995—2000, to strengthen and enhance the integrity legislation in this very Parliament. It took a UNC Government to strengthen and enhance that to give more teeth to the integrity legislation.

10.10 a.m.

Again, it was a UNC Government which came to the Parliament and said that all state officials, from the highest to the lowest, must be accountable. There must be transparency and accountability, and we brought to the Parliament legislation to set up parliamentary committees to enquire into the workings of any statutory bodies, including the service commissions and ministries, so that Ministers and officials would have to answer to the Parliament.

When, between 1995—2000, they were crying corruption everywhere, their history will show they did nothing in the years they were in office to deal with the issue of corruption. It took a UNC Government to do that.

It was a UNC Government, 1995—2000, that dealt with the Freedom of Information Act: that members of the public, ministries, public officials for state agencies, through the legislation that we put in place, could access information through the Act. An entire package of information was put into place.

The Prime Minister had said if they were really serious, and if they had evidence, they could bring it and we would deal with it. When an investigation took place, in no way did this Government hinder it. It was the first time in the history of this country that a high public official has been brought to answer charges of fraud; for the first time, under a UNC Government.

Mr. Speaker, yesterday I could not believe the level to which this Parliament had gone when we were dealing with such a serious issue of the appropriation of moneys to get certain things done. I was totally amazed when the Member for Diego Martin West, I believe, talked in this Parliament about Stayfree and Tampax Government and then sought to impugn the integrity of the Minister of Finance by alluding to the manner in which he was dressed. He will answer for his dress.

My point is, at this level, debating in this Parliament, he is speaking about Stayfree and Tampax in an attempt to deal with the attire of the Minister of Finance, when we are here to talk about serious matters dealing with millions of dollars.

The Member for San Fernando East spent just a few minutes in such an important debate dealing with the moneys of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Do you know what he spoke about? The attire of the Minister of Finance. I thought he would have come to this Parliament prepared to deal with the variations in terms of how the moneys were being spent, the reordering of the priorities, but there was nothing about that. He spoke about the attire of the Minister of Finance. That was the extent of his contribution in this honourable House yesterday.

He spoke about the attire of the Minister of Finance, when he could have spoken about the financial management of the economy; when he could have spoken about the fact that the rate of growth in 1995—2000 was solid and of substance; that we had experienced five years of a rate of growth that they had never experienced.

When the Member for San Fernando East, Mr. Patrick Manning, left office in 1995, unemployment was 17.2 per cent. Under a UNC Government, that has come right down to 12.5 per cent. Prudent financial management! We are here talking about a variation of appropriation, a finance bill.

There is a solid 4 per cent rate of growth. Under Mr. Manning it was 1.4 per cent. Unemployment is down, the rate of growth up, solid and sustainable. When you look at that, not one single new tax was introduced by this Government. This is what we should talk about when dealing with the finances of the country. We should be talking about how the finances should be managed. Instead the hon. Member speaks about the mode of dress of the hon. Minister of Finance. The Member for Diego Martin West talks about Tampax and Stayfree. I could not believe that was the level of debate to which the Opposition had reduced themselves yesterday.

On top of that, yesterday much time was spent on education and talking about the Ibis High School with derision, attempting to decry what we had achieved and saying that we had not achieved universal secondary education. If they cannot see the truth that is staring them in the eye, then all that they can do is to mislead us.

It is very clear that every child who wrote that Common Entrance Examination 2000 has found a place in school. This has been totally different from what happened every year previous to the year 2000. See the truth and face up to it. It is the same when they sit in this Parliament and will not face up to the truth that they have lost the election. They will not face it. They will see the truth coming at them and they will deny it. It is a delusion on their part.

They will deny that every child got a place and paint the Ibis High School into all kinds of corners. They will seek to cast aspersions in terms of the acquisition of the lease for the B.H. Rose building, to make it appear that there was something corrupt and underhand in the manner in which we acquired that building for use.

However, if they had done what they should have done and were advised to do by their own White Paper, that would not have been necessary because they would have then built the schools needed in this country to give each child a place. They did not do it. So, from 1995—2000 this Government constructed over 50 schools in that short five-year period.

Out on the hustings, I had heard all kinds of numbers. I would ask him to name those schools, because I heard they had built 12 or 15. They did not build a single secondary school. In terms of pre-schools, none. They built about eight or nine primary schools. This Government constructed over 50 schools—primary, secondary and pre-schools. The planning department has the statistics.

Again, they say we are lying. It was the same thing yesterday when they accused the Member for Tunapuna. They said he was lying when he said moneys were paid to farmers in Paramin. Here it is in black and white—\$97,000 paid to farmers. When we speak, we are lying, but the statistics are there and the history is there and the record will show it.

I am coming back to that model high school because so much time was spent on it yesterday. In the *Newsday* of Sunday, January 7, an article was carried:

“Fires of Hope at Ibis High School”

They went into the school and talked to the teachers and students.

“Ibis High School may yet turn out to be a model school.

Guided by the vision and firm hand of Principal Monica Regisford-Douglin, the school seems poised to etch its notch in the line up of premier educational institutions in Trinidad and Tobago.

From its inception the school drew much criticism causing a stigma to be attached to the students who were placed there...

Regisford-Douglin, however, was spurred by the very criticisms to turn things around. The rites of passage was the ritualistic renaming of the school...

Now that they have surmounted the stigma together and have bonded, the next step on the way to healing is to help them to believe in themselves and encourage them to be all that they can be.”

A principal who is outstanding working together with the teachers—

Mr. Speaker: The hon. Member’s speaking time has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member’s speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Hon. R. L. Maharaj*]

Question put and agreed to.

10.20 a.m.

Mr. Speaker: Now the Prime Minister and Member for Couva South will make a statement.

CONSTITUTIONAL DILEMMA

The Prime Minister (Hon. Basdeo Panday): [*Desk thumping*] I thank you kindly, Mr. Speaker. I address this honourable House as a Member representative of the people of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago democratically elected by an overwhelming majority of the votes cast in the December 11 general election in the constituency of Couva North and in the nation as a whole.

I address this honourable House as Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago appointed in accordance with the mandate of the Constitution requiring that the leader of the party with the majority of seats in the House should form the Government.

Mr. Speaker, our democratic institutions mandate that, as the elected head of the Government, I am accountable to the people through Parliament. Unlike Guyana, we do not have an Executive President. Because my mandate to govern comes directly from the people, more than 300,000 of whom voted for the re-election of the United National Congress, I also hold myself directly accountable to the people. This is an option that I am yet to exercise in relation to what must now be regarded as the propulsion of our Republic to constitutional crisis, to social and political upheaval, to polarization of the society's diverse groups and, ultimately, to anarchy and to economic collapse.

It is my duty now to inform this honourable House that information has come to the attention of the Government which could only lead to the conclusion that interests opposed to the United National Congress administration are in collusion to seize power, some by violent means. It would be obvious, Mr. Speaker, that security imperatives prohibit disclosure of this information at this time. It would, however, be instructive to relate this information to facts already in the public domain.

On the night of December 11, 2000, in his concession that he had again led his party to another general election defeat, the Leader of the Opposition described the election results as the expression of, and I quote, "The voice of the people". In saying that, he emphasized that the voice of the people is the voice of God. Having made a complete somersault, the Leader of the Opposition declared on Sunday in his political policy position that he did not consider the Government legitimate and that he was contemplating public demonstrations.

Mr. Speaker, it must be noted that the Leader of the Opposition's declaration of his intention to organize demonstrations came mere hours after he was dealt a public reproof by his political mentor, Selwyn Cudjoe, in the *Express* newspaper. It is also noted that the Leader of the Opposition's declaration of his intention to organize street demonstrations was preceded yesterday by the dismissal of the report of the Commonwealth Observer Group as, and I quote, "not worth the paper it was printed on" by the Opposition supporter and apologist Selwyn Ryan writing in the *Express*. In the same vein the *Express* carried an extremely intemperate editorial, written presumably by the Libyan-connected "journalist hit man", army mutineer and my vanquished political foe of long-standing.

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The sequential statements made by Manning, Cudjoe, Shah and Ryan came four days after the re-emergence of Bilaal Abdullah, the Libyan-trained gunman who led the Jamaat al Muslimeen group that murdered a Member of Parliament, a police officer and other innocent and defenceless persons in Abu Bakr and his gang's murderous attempt to seize control of the country on July 27, 1990. The re-emergence of Yasin Abu Bakr's erstwhile second in command came five days after President Robinson had welcomed to President's House Selwyn Cudjoe and others who were at the time engaged in an illegal demonstration that had been denied the required approval of the police. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Bereaux: Why do you not tell them that you have been inducing people to poison the President?

Hon. B. Panday: The Government has received information that certain groups—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Order. Order. Once again, let me advise the Member for La Brea that this House will not conduct its business by you sitting in your seat and yelling across the floor. Let me—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Bereaux: Would you want me to stand?

Mr. Speaker: Take your seat. Let me once again advise you that you will desist from doing such. Press on.

Mr. Bereaux: You must say, "Please take your seat", next time.

Hon. B. Panday: The Government has received information that certain groups are amassing arms, recently smuggled into the country, for what is believed to be a violent attempt to take control of the country. Mr. Speaker, not too long ago the very Selwyn Cudjoe had attempted unsuccessfully to organize in this country a boycott of all businesses not owned by what he called Afro-Trinidadians. *[Interruption]*

These are all facts, Mr. Speaker. Nothing that I have said is conjecture. It is also a fact that in January of 1998, three years ago, the Leader of the Opposition convened a news conference to announce, inter alia, that if the losing party did not accept the results of the election, post-election violence, looting and arson, such as were taking place in Guyana at the time, with the attendant ethnic overtones, were likely to take place here in Trinidad and Tobago after our general election. We can now conclude that the developments the nation is now witnessing might well have been scripted years ago.

It is perhaps instructive to note that in his television address on January 5, the President made reference to voter padding and to challenges to Members of Parliament for making false declarations in their nomination papers. This, His Excellency did, despite the fact that these matters are before the courts. Not a single person has yet been tried, far less convicted, on voter padding charges, Mr. Speaker. The President made reference to two matters involving allegations of false declarations by candidates in the nomination process. In fact, four such matters are before the court. Two of those challenges involve Government Members of this House; the other two challenges have been lodged against the hon. Member for San Fernando East and the hon. Member for Laventille West.

It is possible that some permutation or all of these matters can go to the Privy Council. Any individual, any group respecting the Constitution, the law and the principles of justice and due process would respect the presumption of innocence until guilt is determined. Mr. Speaker, permit me to enter into the record my unequivocal undertaking that the United National Congress Government and I, as well as the party which I am privileged to lead, will respect, honour and abide by the final determination by the courts and/or the Privy Council, whichever becomes the final arbiter in these matters. I am tempted to seek a similar undertaking from the Leader of the Opposition, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Manning: Immediately.

Mr. Valley: Immediately.

Hon. B. Panday: However, his recent remarks suggest that he trusts neither the country's Constitution, the courts nor the law. During the general election campaign, the Leader of the Opposition so outrageously attempted to set the police against the Government that he drew a rebuke from the Commissioner of Police for what was described as an egregious offer of a bribe to the police. What we are faced with is an unending series of kangaroo courts in which the detractors of the Government have set themselves up as prosecutors, judges, juries and executioners. The fact is that over the last six weeks the Leader of the Opposition and his cohorts have repeatedly made statements intended to discredit every democratic institution in our society, including the Elections and Boundaries Commission. They have also gone so far as to impugn the reputation of members of the Commonwealth Observer Group. Mr. Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition has accused the EBC of being in illegal collusion with the UNC.

Mr. Valley: But it is true.

Hon. B. Panday: He has alleged every imaginable violation of every imaginable election rule. Surely, Sir, even a child would assume that if the UNC was in control of the EBC systems and capable of all the devices that the Opposition Leader claims were brought into play, we would have won 29 seats, not 19. What the country has been experiencing for more than a month is an unfolding conspiracy to defeat the will of the electorate which, with the largest number of votes ever given to a single political party, re-elected the United National Congress to Government, the first such political development since the Eric Williams era. Perhaps because of this, and in spite of this, forces of insurrection now appear bent on exploiting the flagrant and continuing contravention of the Constitution by the holder of the highest office in the land.

Last Friday, the President took the utterly irregular action of summoning the acting Commissioner of Police to attend upon him. This confirms the President's sad and petulant defiance of the constitutional reality that Trinidad and Tobago does not provide for an Executive President on the United States model. In a singularly improper action last week, the President wrote directly to the Secretary General requesting the heads of the Caribbean Community—calling for their support for ratification of the Rome Treaty. Such an initiative comes properly from government to government not from Head of State to heads of government. The heads of the Community therefore correctly did not give any consideration to the President's communication. To say the least, this violation of convention and protocol was a source of considerable embarrassment to the Trinidad and Tobago delegation at the Caricom summit in Jamaica Friday last.

Mr. Speaker, my oath of office compels me to protect the Constitution and the law and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Against this background that I have provided, I have written to the President advising him to formally assign the functions and responsibilities associated with the Ministry of National Security to the Office of the Prime Minister. The protective services of Trinidad and Tobago have an unblemished and, indeed, praiseworthy record in the discharge of their duties on behalf of the State in protection of the citizens and in defence of the Constitution and the law. With the machinations that are now unfolding, we can permit no attempt by any interest to unconstitutionally and illegally assume control of the protective services. The schedule of responsibilities attached to the Ministry of National Security will, therefore, remain with the Office of the Prime Minister until the President carries out his constitutional obligations to act on the advice of the Prime Minister in the appointment of a Minister of National Security.

10.35 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, the truculence, the threats and the “badjohnism” of the Leader of the Opposition and those in alliance with him, in conspiracy to remove the constitutionally elected government, completely ignore the fact that Trinidad and Tobago is not, and never really was, “PNM country”, as they say.

In our plural society, there are untold thousands who are passionately in support of the United National Congress and who are prepared to resist any attempt to steal the government from the UNC. There are, as well, untold numbers of responsible and conscious persons, not to be counted among the supporters of the UNC, who are repulsed by the naked grab to illegally seize power even if it means polarizing the society and the possibility of violent civil conflict.

Mr. Speaker, I have studiously refrained from any statement that would exacerbate the tensions that are being incited in this plural society. Let not my silence be mistaken for weakness.

Mr. Valley: “Bad John”!

Hon. B. Panday: Those who are preparing for an assault upon the constitutionally elected Government must pause and give thought to the fact that there are as many who will resolutely resist such an assault. Against this reality, I urge the Leader of the Opposition to “cool it”! [*Laughter*] I urge him to place the country above his personal inward hungers.

Mr. Speaker, it may well be that given his experience in the uprising of 1970 and the attempted coup of 1990, the prospect of civil disturbance now holds no terror for President Robinson. However, the mere contemplation of instability of the nature to which the alliance of Opposition elements appear to be propelling the country is traumatizing the vast majority of people in Trinidad and Tobago.

Every father and every mother wants a future for his and her child or children. A large section of our society comprises middle-class families, including a large number of our public servants who have worked their way up from poverty to secure jobs and ownership of decent homes. Our business sector embraces thousands of small businesses striving to make it and grow. Our wider business community has invested in the organizations that have helped to generate more than 70,000 new jobs since 1995. They employ the bulk of the men and women in our labour force. All of this is now under serious threat.

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Mr. Speaker, investor confidence is now shaken as a result of the crisis that the President has caused. The Opposition forces and the drug cartels are emboldened by the President's intransigence in his unlawful and improper refusal to act on the advice of the Prime Minister under section 40(2) of the Constitution. The country faces serious destabilization from the inevitable outcomes to the Opposition Leader's ongoing incitements and his planned demonstrations together with a linkage to Selwyn Cudjoe's overt efforts to set race against race and the Jamaat's warning of unlawful intervention. The danger we face will not only be the economic collapse and the flight of brain and money from the country, but also a conflagration that will leave this country as poor and as ravaged as those in which the lust of politicians have set diverse groups against one another. One must not permit this iniquity to descend upon our Republic.

As I have said before, my oath of office compels me to protect the Constitution and the law and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Nothing will deter me from the discharge of these obligations.

Mr. Speaker, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker: The Member for Siparia may continue her contribution.

FINANCE COMMITTEE REPORT

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar Mr. Speaker, there is just one issue I would like to clarify for the record that was raised by the Member for Diego Martin West when he indicated that the Minister of Education had fired the firm of Watson and Company in order to place the Maintenance Training and Security Company (MTS) in a position to build the secondary schools. In the first place, his information is totally incorrect. Watson and Company, at no time, had any part, business or contract for the construction of the 10 secondary schools under the SEMP. They were never part of that programme.

The Minister of Education could not fire them in order to hire MTS. When I came into the Ministry of Education in October 1999, MTS was already contracted to carry out the works for project management of construction of the 10 new secondary schools. In the first instance, his information is incorrect. Watson and Company never dealt with any contract for constructing the secondary schools. In the second instance, Mr. Speaker, there are two programmes under the Ministry of Education. One of those is SEMP, which is the Secondary Education Modernization Programme, for the construction of the secondary schools. The other one is the fourth basic education programme.

Under the fourth basic education programme, it is true that Watson and Company were the project managers for that programme which dealt mainly with the construction of primary schools and four secondary schools, one of which was the Cunupia High School. All the other secondary schools constructed, as I said, were always under the project management firm of the Maintenance Training and Security Company.

When I came into the Ministry of Education in October 1999, the firm of Watson and Company was contracted to project manage that fourth basic education programme. Thereafter, on a recommendation brought by the then Minister of Finance based on information and advice he had received from something called the Project Management Unit of the Ministry of Finance, the Minister of Finance recommended to the Cabinet that projects from various Ministries, including the Ministry of Education, be allocated to state agencies in an effort to expedite the process, and this was where Watson and Company, whose contract had then expired, had applied for a renewal of contract. They were one of the companies whose contract was not renewed for the fourth basic education programme, based on that recommendation of the Minister of Finance.

In the events that transpired after that decision was taken at the Cabinet level, the Minister of Education recommended to the Cabinet that given the experience of Watson and Company, having been involved in the fourth basic education programme and having been chosen by the Central Tenders Board as the appropriate project management firm, that that firm be re-contracted, the contract be renewed in order to continue the fourth basic education programme. That is what happened.

I have heard many times, the Member for Diego Martin West in the last year or so, and especially in the last several months, publicly stating that the Minister of Education fired Watson and Company in order to give work to MTS for construction of the schools. This is why I decided that it would be best to clear that once and for all.

I am saying, firstly, that Watson and company was never involved in the project management of the SEMP construction of the 10 secondary schools. That information is totally incorrect. Secondly, it was on the recommendation of the Ministry of Finance, Project Management Unit, that generally—not just Education, all the ministries—decisions were taken that the project management aspects of work, various projects of the Government, go under several state companies including Nipdec, Tidco, MTS and others.

I am saying that in the events that happened the Minister of Education recommended to the Cabinet that Watson and Company, having been chosen by the Central Tenders Board, be renewed as project managers and they are still the project managers for the fourth basic education programme. They are still involved in that programme which, as I say, is primarily for construction of primary schools. That programme also deals with the pre-schools.

There is another issue that was raised, and for the record again, I would like to clear that. It has to do with what the Member for Diego Martin West has been repeatedly calling the increasing costs of the secondary schools under the SEMP. The original cost of over \$130-something million was not a definite cost. It was an estimate made by those who were putting the project into place. That was what I met when I came into the Ministry of Education; an estimate of \$138 million to construct 10 secondary schools. Thereafter, the process, as I understand it, is that requests for tenders are put out and the design consultants come into it. When they come into it, they do their designs and then there is actual work taking place. Based on that, the cost is then actually materialized and firmed up. That is where the \$183 million arose at that point in time.

Thereafter, I am advised, and I know for a fact, that because these schools were being built mainly in rural areas, they did not have the infrastructure, the basic utilities, and so, a large part of the increase to \$238 million, which was the final cost, a large part of that went to bringing in utilities; water, electricity and roads. A large part of that extra cost after the \$183 million went for service utilities in areas where there were none. In fact, up to now at Coryal and Manzanilla where those schools are, a lot of construction work is being done with respect to the roads.

Mr. Speaker, we have another batch of schools to begin construction shortly. In all, 12 new secondary schools. The Member for La Brea would be very pleased to know that at least two of those may be in his constituency. One is the reconstruction of the Palo Seco Secondary School which is to be totally redone, and the next is at Vessigny. So, two of the schools, contrary to the view that we are only building in our own constituencies—the Members for Diego Martin West, Diego Martin East and Diego Martin Central will be also happy to know that at least two of those secondary schools are to be constructed in Diego Martin. Work is to begin.

We will do what we can to get that work done in keeping with the law. We will not act outside the law. Whatever allegations that were made, Member for Diego Martin West, again if he has any evidence of any impropriety, of anything illegal, bring the evidence, but as far as I know for the construction of those schools, as far as I know for the setting up of the Ibis High School, there has been no impropriety and no illegality. If there is and they have the evidence, bring it.

We had a challenge last year. We would recall that in 1998, the hon. Prime Minister had clearly stated that he was abolishing the Common Entrance Examination in keeping with the vision of our very first Prime Minister, the true Father of the Nation, the honourable Dr. Eric Williams. It was his vision that every child would be given a place in a secondary school, and in 1998 when the hon. Prime Minister spoke, this is what he indicated, that he was abolishing the Common Entrance Examination and, thereafter, that every child who wrote that final examination would be given a place in a secondary school.

10.50 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, even after that, that those who come after the abolishing of that examination would continue to have places. This is our commitment. Our vision is not only for the future—I heard a phrase, which I think, is worthy of repeating—“our vision is a vision for the future of the future”. We must plan and put in place the future of the future. [*Interruption*] If you do not know what that means, I think you have a serious problem. That is our vision and our commitment to the children of Trinidad and Tobago, who will be the adults of Trinidad and Tobago, who will be the leaders and citizens of this country; that is our commitment.

Mr. Speaker, this year construction of 12 more secondary schools will begin. Some will finish in time for September, some would not, but the point is—and this was the point I think they failed to realize again last year, that it was going to happen—it is going to happen. So when we said that we were going to have those schools for 2000, some of the schools were not ready, but we gave the commitment and we found a place for every child. Most of those schools are now ready. There were some to be completed in January, and, shortly—the last three are almost done, I think some roadworks are taking place in Manzanilla and Coryal, so as soon as those works are done we will move the children into the new high schools.

In the same way, come September 2001, I know there would be the same kind of criticisms that we experienced last year: the same chaos and “all hell would break loose”, I remember all of that; the prophecies of doom and gloom, when all we were trying to do was to give every child a place. When we should have had assistance coming forward, when we should have had help to ensure that such a thing happened, instead there was criticism and the doom and gloom that was being preached. This year some of them will be ready in September, some of them will be ready after September, but we will find places so that the children can be accommodated until they are ready.

Do you know what they said, Mr. Speaker? They said that we did not plan it, that they have been planning for so long; it is like they must get everything done before placing the children. We did not see it that way. We saw that the first priority was to get a place for the children. Priority one—the Prime Minister had made the argument very, very cogently when he said, “You are talking about quality education, and you are saying that we are denying these children quality education,” but he asked, “How can you have any kind of education at all, unless you are in school?” So the first step was to place the children in school. We did not sacrifice quality for quantity even then.

I had made the point in this Parliament—and I know the Member for Diego Martin Central was very surprised when I made that statement—that for the first time we have had a written curriculum for secondary school subjects. The first time was last year, the year 2000; we never had a written curriculum. People operated on the syllabus given by Cambridge. It was a syllabus from Cambridge to prepare for an examination, not a curriculum. For the first time we have written “curriculums” for the secondary schools. We have so many things happening within the secondary and primary schools’ structure.

In fact, Mr. Speaker, I do not have the statistics here, but when we looked at the statistics of the 1995 Common Entrance Examination performance by students in mathematics and English, and the 2000 performance, we saw that a higher percentage of children had scored a higher mark than in 1995. Therefore, in the five-year period, there had been qualitative improvements in addition to the quantitative improvements that were made in the system.

There was talk about the private schools. The issue arose about the private schools and whether there was a mandate that they should not charge registration fees and so on. The Member for Laventille East/Morvant, without disclosing which school—again, if you have evidence that someone is in breach of what is a clear mandate—he read the section from the Education Act. The Member for Laventille East/Morvant is a lawyer himself.

He read the section from the Education Act which says that you cannot charge any fees for the delivery of the curriculum in a school, yet he said, "I have a letter here; they came to me", and he was beating his chest as Member of Parliament to say that people had to pay registration fees at schools, but he said, "I am not telling you who it is, because I do not want you to victimize them." "I am not telling you which school; I am not telling you which student, because you are so vindictive that you are going to victimize them." How can we deal with breaches unless they are brought to our attention, unless we know where they are? If he has evidence, once again, bring the evidence. Last year I faced a lot of criticism, but I gave a very clear ruling on the law that no registration fees were to be charged.

Mr. Speaker, what is the next thing we have to deal with in the education system? Every year parents are told that they must send their children for lessons in school, and then the parents have to pay for lessons in school.

Mr. Bereaux: Roy Augustus!

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar: Using the school facilities in order to take moneys from parents to give the children lessons. There are allegations that those same teachers would not teach during the normal classes, students have to go to the special lessons, the paid lessons, in order to get something. Mr. Speaker, I intend to hold discussions with the stakeholders: with the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA) and the National Parent/Teacher Association, with a view to prohibiting giving school lessons for payment in the schools.

If a person wants private lessons, that is up to them; you can deal with private lessons, but do not use the school facilities and then charge the student for lessons, and make it mandatory. Do you know how many parents complain and say that if you have four children, you have to pay for four of them to get lessons? We have to do that in consultation with the stakeholders.

All these years, on the issue of registration fees, it was very clear that the schools were in breach of the law. The reason was two-fold: it was not that they were malicious, greedy or misappropriating funds, but all these years they had been charging registration fees, and nothing was ever done about it. It was only, again, in the year 2000 that we made it very clear that they could not charge the registration fees. If there are those who are in breach of it, we need to know where they are and who they are, so that we can deal with it appropriately.

Mr. Speaker, I am saying the answer for that registration fee is very simple. Many teachers and principals said that the funding they received was so small that they could not run the school properly without charging registration fees. The

problem was that the fees were so irregular and inconsistent; there was no consistency across the board. In some cases there was no accounting for the amount of moneys received and the expenditure of those moneys. There are allegations where persons said that the moneys have been collected for years, but you cannot find anything on which the moneys have been spent, so the whole system really needed to be dealt with. The issue they said was, “We do not get enough funding.”

Mr. Speaker, you will recall that in the 2000/2001 Budget, which is for this fiscal year, that after 18 years the level of funding in grants to government and government-assisted schools, was raised to about \$30 million, from what it used to be, \$7 million. A tremendous increase in grant funding, in order for the schools to conduct their business. That was a major milestone in education. Those who are collecting registration fees have no reason so to do. As I said, if the Member has the evidence, let him bring it and we can deal with it.

Those are some of the issues that were raised. Again, I give full support to the variations as proposed in the Motion that is the subject of this debate. I thank you.

Mr. Hedwige Bereaux (*La Brea*): Mr. Speaker, I rise to join the debate on the Motion:

"Be it resolved that this House adopt the First Report (2001 Session) of the Finance Committee of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on proposals for the Expenditure from the Public Revenue which were not included in Annual Estimates, 1999/2000."

Before I get into the meat of this debate, let me say that I was listening to the radio this morning and I heard Dale Enoch and Tony Lee speaking about the “green verbs” that came from the Chair. I do not know; I did not hear any, but I just want to say that I would expect, as you are in charge, that “would you please sit” and so on, things like that to be directed to me. I would expect that and I would respect you. I would call you “Mr. Speaker” from time to time, but I would leave that now.

The hon. Minister of Finance got here on the last occasion, yesterday, and he is here again today, and we are dealing with the variations from the 1999/2000 budget. A number of statements have been made backwards and forwards, and we are, apparently, operating as though everything—to use an American statement—is kosher.

I have been elected to come here in this Parliament and make my contributions, and I will make my contributions; but, as we say in law, I will take a point, *in limine*, or a preliminary point. That is to say, if a government, a Senator or anybody is elected by someone who is not entitled so to do, then the election of that Senator is improper, illegal and of dubious validity. I want to first record that, as far as I am concerned, the hon. Minister is of dubious authority in this House.

Hon. Member: What is the relevance?

Mr. H. Bereaux: Nonetheless, that will be dealt with in due course.

Hon. Member: Who determines that? You are a bush lawyer or what?

Mr. H. Bereaux: I want to say the basis upon which I am doing it. [*Crosstalk*] [*Interruption*] I want to say the basis upon which I am making that statement. The basis is that two Members on the opposite side, of the 19 Members who were certified as having won, are themselves, in my view, sitting in this House improperly, from a legal standpoint. I refer, in particular, with no rancour, but just with the facts of the law, to the Member of Parliament for Ortoire/Mayaro and the Member of Parliament for Pointe-a-Pierre.

You see, Mr. Speaker, we always in this country speak about laws and the application of the law. I am now thinking that when I look in the warrants here I see certain statements in the Ministry of Legal Affairs, so this also involves that. From time to time, we have persons of not so exalted positions, breaking the law. Albeit, I have seen, from time to time, and I have heard, I have read and I have been in court when persons who have been charged with or who have sworn to false statutory declarations, have been brought before the court and the full force of law brought upon them. Those are two instances. Then there is the instance of the very vociferous Member of Parliament for Tunapuna who also, in my view, has come to this Parliament, I am certain—and I am not even talking about voter padding—on a questionable legal situation. I want to point that out.

Therefore, as far as I am concerned, the hon. Minister, regardless of his dress—which I know when he reads page 8 of a book *Parliament, Republic of Trinidad and Tobago of the House of Representatives*, a decision will be made, he will make a decision on that; I am not going to worry to try to further chastise him in respect of that. He is a denizen in this House, and he will know how to behave. I believe I can depend on that.

11.05 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, that is my basic point and I have set the stage for where I am. I would now deal with what has transpired so far in the debate. The hon. Member for Tunapuna got up here and made a comment on me and my taking off my jacket a couple years ago in this honourable House, but the first thing when I did it—*[Interruption]* It is the truth, and it is good for you to know that I speak the truth and I accept the truth when it is spoken. It is the truth, I did it in order to get water for my constituents and the fact is that water was received by my constituents, they are receiving a lot of water now. Certain pipes which were ordered way back in the days of the PNM, they were not putting them down and they have been put down as a result of my violent protest in this House. So I made no apologies when the Presiding Officer told me to leave the Parliament, I bowed to his ruling and I left. I did not make any contention about it, I apologized to him because I had already done the job, and the job, as you would know is, I got the necessary attention being paid to the members of my constituency.

More important, I want to tell you—*[Interruption]* That is all right, but I did not have to pad, I might have to undress in full at another time, but that did not matter. Mr. Speaker, I got what I wanted and what was needed at the time and that was water. That, in my view, is in the highest traditions of any Member of Parliament, or anybody who seeks to represent people in that you lay down—It is said a good shepherd will lay down his life for his sheep and that is what I did. I did not take off my tie, I did what I had to do and, as far as I am concerned, I am a man who, if I feel violently about something, and I will feel violently, and when the Member for Tunapuna came here and said he is still Minister or something, I know how very well he feels about his position as Minister. Because it was reported in the newspapers some time ago that a certain indecent behaviour was attributed to his Prime Minister in respect of a very close female person to him. He did nothing about it because his ministerial position was of more value to him than the respect and the dignity of that lady. Now, that is him, that is not me, and I am not upset with him, he does what he wants and I will represent my people in the way that I see fit.

There were certain statements, particularly made by the hon. Member for Siparia and she referred to the statement made by the hon. Member for Diego Martin West where he said that in the year 2000, no money was given to the Paramin farmers and it showed that in the year 1999, money was given to the Paramin/Santa Cruz area, but the hon. Member for Diego Martin West indicated the year 2000, and they made a big song and dance by saying that the year is

1999/2000. [Interruption] Give me a chance and let me speak, please? You have assisted in corrupting the elections and now you are obstructing me, I am not speaking to you, I am speaking to the Speaker and I am not dealing with you. He said in the year 2000, and they pointed out that in the year 1999 the name of Paramin/Santa Cruz was identified under farmers and I was then told that he was speaking about 1999/2000, but the year 1998 was also listed here. Were we talking about 1998, 1999/2000? So the statement made when he said in the year 2000, was correct.

The hon. Member for Siparia went to great lengths to say that the UNC Government was so good that they said it was the first time any Member of Parliament, any high official, was ever brought before the courts on any charges and she was referring to the hon. former Member for Pointe-a-Pierre and former Minister of Local Government, and she was boasting about it. There is something called collective responsibility of the Cabinet and in addition to that, there is also the question that we in this House, time and again, were pointing out to the hon. Members on the other side the infractions of the Minister of Local Government and a number of others. I am sorry that the various members of the security forces are not here still because I was going to make some references to some information which they were given, but they are not here and we will deal with that in due course. It has been a long time they knew about this and they did nothing. They purposed, intentionally waited until after the elections and then brought these charges and they are now trying to use these charges against the gentleman as though they have done something great, but they knew about this a long time ago.

We see in this statement here, the warrants they refer to the Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) from time to time and I think there is \$270,000 involved and they made it clear to tell me that they are referring to the period 1999/2000. I take it that it is from October 1, 1999 to September 30, 2000, so any period between that time is involved and, therefore, I read some statements here. I am reading from the *Daily Express* newspaper of Thursday, January 18, 2001. It says:

“May 31, 1998 to December 31, 1999—”

That involves the period under reference and URP is in this, so I feel I must mention this.

“Singh corruptly solicited \$14,000 being ten per cent of the proceeds of a First Citizens Bank (FCB) cheque made out to Petromar Construction Ltd to ensure that Rampersad, who provided goods and services to the URP, was paid for such.”

We would need to know whether in fact that was an excess payment or otherwise.

“Singh similarly solicited \$25,875, being ten per cent of a cheque in favour of Petromar, for the same purpose.

Singh corruptly received \$100,000 from Rampersad for the same purpose.

Singh corruptly received \$125,000, being 50 per cent, of a Government of Trinidad and Tobago cheque in favour of Oilfield and Marine Sales and Services Ltd, to ensure that Rampersad was paid for providing goods and services he supplied to the Unemployment Relief Programme.”

So we see 10 per cent, 10 per cent and then we see 50 per cent.

Singh corruptly received \$250,000 cash from Rampersad for a similar purpose.

Singh corruptly solicited \$60,000, being ten per cent of a Government cheque, to ensure that Rampersad was paid for a similar purpose.

Singh corruptly received \$80,000 as an inducement from Rampersad to ensure he is paid for goods and services provided.

May 31, 1998 to October 2, 1999—Singh corruptly solicited \$11,485.04, being ten per cent of an FCB cheque...”

The point I am making on this is that in one instance it is 10 per cent and you may look at it in a certain way, but in fact, if, and I do not know what experience some people have, but I have some experience with people who do contracts and several things like that and a contractor puts a certain amount—I am sure the hon. Minister of Finance also has a lot of experience because I am sure he has examined the books of many contractors. Any contractor who is bidding for a job and was charged, he looks at his cost and then he may end up with a 20 per cent profit. If some Minister of Government receives half of it, 50 per cent, or 10 per cent or whatever, it is quite clear that the State, the Ministry of Finance, would have advanced more money in that period for what that particular job should have cost than what it cost.

11.20 a.m.

As a result of that, all those who were in that Cabinet with the former Minister of Local Government have to hold themselves responsible when we see that, and we also hear of the other allegations which were made from time to time about other ministers of much larger sums. The hon. Member for Caroni East is threatening me: I do not know what he is threatening me with.

I want to let the Member for Caroni East know that I am from Longdenville and I have some relatives whom he does not know who have listened to him, the Member for Caroni East, and the Member for Caroni Central and the Member for San Fernando West in a certain conversation, I am not going to deal with that at this time but let it be known.

As I was saying the whole question of the variations in respect of the URP are suspect. We know that the hon. Minister was not a Member of the Cabinet, he was just brought in to bring some kind of respectability to the finances or for what passes for financial management in the Government. Be that as it may, there are serious questions as to whether or not the balancing of the accounts could ever be proper when you have such signal complaints being made about the Ministry of Local Government, and in particular, those persons who are involved. Anyhow, I will not deal with that now.

I want to read from a *Mirror* Newspaper of January 2001:

"Dhanraj cronies run scared: Certain officials of regional corporations, especially councillors who have developed a close bond with fired Local Government Minister Dhanraj Singh, are now said to be running scared."

I note there are a number of people who do not want us to talk about these things, they say it is sub judice, but a number of wrong and corrupt things have been done and it is not sufficient for the Government to say that they have charged him and it is all okay. It is not all okay. Fortunately, I have had some opportunity to appear before the court. Before that I did not go to court; I had not gone for many years. I am not a high-flying lawyer like the hon. Attorney General. I go to the Magistrates' Court also, but more important than that it has brought me directly into contact with a number of persons and a number of injustices and a number of unfair applications of the law in respect of poor litigants. I am certain the hon. Member for Princes Town, the Deputy Speaker will bear me out.

There are young, poor people coming before the courts charged with possession of three pounds of marijuana, sometimes 14 grammes, 18 grammes as the case may be and they are put on bail for \$200,000. Not that I am saying possession of marijuana for the purposes of trafficking is not illegal but there must be some concern that they are put on bail and they do not get bail. Even if they get bail because of these high-priced bailors, people are breaking the law nonetheless. When they get bail somehow or other, whether contrived or otherwise, they are arrested again. We have a man who is charged on 27 counts with corruptly soliciting \$2million of State money, a man in high office,

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a man who had been paid properly, and he is given bail for \$150,000. It is a joke. That is what we found out. We do not know what else he stole, but I am saying that cries to high Heaven for vengeance and we in this Parliament have to do something about that. I now move away from him, he is a [word expunged] I really do not want to waste time [Interruption]

Mr. R.L. Maharaj: Mr. Speaker, I want to point out that the Standing Orders are clear, Erskine May is clear about matters which are before the court and which can prejudice a trial and calling an accused person a [word expunged] can be used in order to stop a prosecution, therefore it is not right for Members to do that.

Mr. H. Béréau: Mr. Speaker, there is no need. I agree with the hon. Attorney General.

Mr. Speaker: It will be withdrawn from the record.

Mr. H. Béréau: Let me move from that because I think it has been ventilated sufficiently and in terms of what I wanted to say. I will get back to it at another time in another place, but for the time being we have dealt with it.

I read in today's papers where the Director of Public Prosecutions—before I get to him, under "National Security", we see where salaries and COLA, in the amount of \$11,439,000 was removed from salaries and COLA and another \$4,561,000 was removed from vacant posts. We have had a situation and one seems to be growing where whenever the groups in the society apply to the police for permission to march they are refused and the claim is their inability to provide enough security. In the discretion of the police, maybe that is correct. The Commissioner, the Deputy Commissioner, or whoever has responsibility is entitled to say whether or not he has the necessary police strength to deal with a march of some size.

11.30 a.m.

I want to point out that because of failure—we see a number of vacant posts; we see other movements from payment of salaries and we are left with a situation here where you do not have the police, you do not fill the posts and you are using it as a method by which you want to suppress the freedom of expression of the people. This Government is very fond of talking about freedom, about the Constitution. They use the Constitution like a drunk uses a lamp post, not for elimination, but for support. You see, on the one hand, they talk about one of the enshrined rights under the Constitution—and I am going to read it:

“The right of the individual to equality before the law and the protection of the law.”

I spoke of that previously in respect of bail. We have freedom of association and assembly; freedom of thought and expression; freedom of movement. But as is said from time to time, no freedom is absolute, and where a society believes that freedom in some way should be circumscribed, the society gets together and sets some rules in terms of freedom.

Although we have freedom of assembly, when you know you want to hold a public meeting in this country, you must apply to the police for permission and you have to apply 48 hours in advance. I am one of those persons who said that changing it from 24 hours to 48 was unduly restrictive. But it passed in this House and it is the law. The intention was, you wanted to give the police enough time to marshal their forces. But now that the police are getting enough time to marshal their forces, it is now that you see the police not giving permission to parties to march or to assemble.

I know—the hon. Prime Minister made reference when he spoke—permission was asked to march from Tunapuna to Port of Spain. The people of Tunapuna who, rightly or wrongly, believe that certain things went wrong in the general election in respect of Tunapuna, wanted to march to show their concern, and it was refused. They did not say “You can’t march on Saturday this week because there was a problem, but you could apply and maybe we would allow you to march on Wednesday or on some other day, or on Sunday.” But they totally refused.

So what we see is the police being used to prevent assembly and to circumscribe one of the enshrined rights in the Constitution, namely the right to freedom of movement in groups, and also the right to freedom of association and assembly. Another group sought to march on the day Parliament was opened. I saw police in the square preventing more than three people from talking together. I looked at it from a distance. It was also reported to me.

I want to point out, as much as those rules were meant to protect the society, a suppression of one of the enshrined rights in the Constitution needs to be looked at. Maybe the police could properly say, “We did not have enough people”. And if they said that, here you find the Government that has failed to make use of the salaries and COLA, the money that was voted by this Parliament for salaries and COLA, now being permitted to use the lack of police presence as a means of not permitting people to march and/or to assemble.

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I am certain that when they came to this Parliament, as I could recall, and they were seeking to approve sums of money in order to deal with national security, I know they always concern themselves with how many more police they would like to put on the street; how many more cars they would like to have, and here now when they get the money, they do not spend it on the purpose for which it was given. They do something else with it and come now and expect this honourable House to agree and to quietly permit them to do what they are doing.

I do not want to talk about any creeping dictatorship or anything like that. I just want it to be made quite clear that the Commissioner of Police should not and must not use the fact that persons who wish to assemble and persons who wish to march and apply to him for permission, as an indication that he could use his powers to stop that. That is one of the things I want to point out. [*Innterruption*] No, no. I am dealing with the Finance Bill. Maybe the Member did not read the Schedule. [*Interruption*] No, no. You see, you interfere with me. Mr. Speaker, the Member for Chaguanas is asking me about the basis upon which I am making this statement. I was pointing out—maybe he was not paying attention; he does not think it interesting, but—

Mr. Speaker: I think the Member knows well enough if he ignored that aside—he was doing fine; his contribution was going fine. Ignore that aside and continue.

Mr. H. Beraux: I want to help him. You see, one of the corporal works of mercy is to teach the ignorant, and I want to help him. That is why I am going to point out that I am looking at page 11 of the Schedule: “Relating to the Fourth Supplementary General Warrant 1999/2000.” I am further looking at page 12 of the Schedule. On page 11 you see, \$11,439,000 and those sums were transferred to Subheads in the same ministry amounting in total to the amount of the transfer. I also looked at page 12: Sub Item—Vacant Posts—Salaries and COLA, and it says, “Provision in Estimates (Original and Supplemental)—\$4,561,000;” and it says, “Net Decrease—\$4,561,000;” transferred to Subhead—and there are a number of Subheads listed amounting to the same amount.

I take it that after that very short course in reading, the Member for Chaguanas will now be able to understand what I am doing.

11.40 a.m.

Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, we have a situation in the Ministry of Health with respect to salaries and COLA. Under the Ministry of Health there is: Salaries and COLA”, \$1,886,363. There is a decrease in salaries and COLA. There is also a

decrease of \$2,060,000 in respect of the Ministry of Health. We know what a disaster the Ministry of Health has been. We also know that nurses, doctors and others, from time to time, have been marching—they have been allowed to march. In fact the nurses have been out on strike in San Fernando, Port of Spain and St. James for months. They did not get their pay. Then we have had the Minister coming here from time to time saying that the metropolitan countries were enticing our nurses to go abroad and work. *[Interruption]* Mr. Speaker, the hon. Members for Caroni East and Tunapuna seem to be trying to find out about me. *[Interruption]* Yes, I did work in the Bahamas. I practised law there for seven years.

Hon. Member: You have a house there?

Mr. H. Bereaux: More than that *[Laughter]* but I do not have Bahamian citizenship. The Bahamian citizen who carries the same name as myself, and is in the same profession, is named Hedwige Steven Kensilton Bereaux but there is a little “II” next to it. He is not an attorney-at-law because he does not practise in Trinidad and Tobago, but he is a solicitor. He was born in the Bahamas on May 27, 1972 and because both his parents were Trinidadian he became a Trinidad and Tobago citizen by descent. It means that if he were to choose to contest elections in Trinidad and Tobago he cannot be charged with swearing a false statutory declaration because he did not obtain dual citizenship by any voluntary act of his own. He attained it by virtue of the fact, good or bad, of where he was born—he had no say in that—and where his parents are from, neither did he have a say in that.

As for my own citizenship, fortunately or unfortunately, I am a citizen, and a proud one at that, only of Trinidad and Tobago and I have no intention of changing or renouncing it or any such thing. As to what I have, where I have it, we will leave that for other persons to determine, but I can assure you that I worked very hard for it, as I continue to work hard for the very little I may have.

Mr. Speaker; The speaking time of the hon. Member has expired.

Motion made, That the hon. Member’s speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. *[Mr. M. Joseph]*

Question put and agreed to.

Mr. H. Bereaux: Mr. Speaker, as I was saying before I was interrupted by the Member for Tunapuna and the Member for Caroni East who gave me an opportunity, which I crave, to explain my personal circumstances in this House,

the Ministry of Health has had an unfortunate experience. I am not even going to say it is because of the slackness of the Minister or his ineffectiveness and that is why they made him a junior minister, and very junior at that. I am just saying that it has had an unfortunate experience where all health professionals have been complaining about the many problems that stem, not only from equipment for which they make excuses from time to time about it taking time to put in place—I will grant that—but in terms of paying a staff, especially in the regional health authorities.

Mr. Speaker, we have been in the situation and the reason or necessity was found, somehow or the other, not to spend \$1.8 million in one instance and \$2 million in another in the regional health authorities. If that does not point to gross mismanagement, I do not know what does. We do not have any explanation from the other side in terms of why. They just came, maybe because the Minister is new and he has not yet become accustomed to what standards are required in this honourable House. He has not explained it. I do not know if he will last long enough, illegally, to really learn—that is if he is a very quick learner. Nonetheless, I would expect something like that to be comprehensively dealt with by the hon. Minister.

Mr. Speaker, I did not want to deal with this, but when the other side comes and talks about it, I have to deal with it. They were talking about the Elections and Boundaries Commission, voter padding and so forth. I am a politician.

Mr. John: I thought you were a lawyer.

Mr. H. Béraux: I am also a politician. I try to be honest about what I am. You are a “paverman” but, be that as it may, I like you to be a “paverman” because I have some other things to talk to you about before I leave. *[Laughter]* I am a politician and we in this House are trained to hold the politicians responsible. Very rarely, you want to deal with functionaries so I normally would not want to deal with the head of the EBC or even the commissioners, but Howard Cayenne—I want his name to be recorded and if I were a vindictive man I would take a picture of him and show it to all persons in certain constituencies because at the end of the day the buck stops by him. He, on one occasion, gave a statement in the newspapers saying that there was no padding and everything was okay. Then, I saw him on the television some time ago, insisting that there could have been, and there was a possibility that it was done and so on.

11.50 a.m.

It is quite clear to me, and I have heard information, that his liaison with certain people may have caused him, if not actively, to have turned a blind eye on certain illegal activities which have gone on during the elections. We believe that the law will take its course and that we will be vindicated. We also believe that if the infractions that are alleged to have been committed by the Member for Ortoire/Mayaro and the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre are ever heard in court, we will be vindicated.

I tell them through you, Mr. Speaker, and particularly the Member for Ortoire/Mayaro, not to allow these gentlemen—I know he is a great calypsonian. I do not use great in respect of many people. He is very accomplished. He said yesterday that this is like *ex tempore*. It is, and I know he will make good contributions while he is here.

However, you will notice that the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre in his utterances always said that he wanted to do the right thing. Do you know why? He was well advised and he was trying to set up the stage. I always wanted to do the right thing and even though I do something wrong now, excuse me. They have set him up differently. I mean no harm to him but the facts are that all the “gun talk” they were encouraging him to give during the elections, if this matter ever comes before a court of law—he is not charged now so that it is not *sub judice*—his words will put a different spin on what he may unwittingly have done.

Mr. Speaker, in respect of the Elections and Boundaries Commission, I lay complete blame on Howard Cayenne. I did not know until he came on the television and admitted what he refused to admit before the election. I then said that there appears to be some malice on the part of this man.

We were talking about the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. Let me refer to the area on the page right after National Security. On page 14, it shows a decrease in personnel expenditure of \$1,170,000 and an increase in consulting and contracting services. I do not know if this included in any way some of the myriad legal luminaries and consultants which the hon. Attorney General seems to have a propensity to bring to this country from time to time. I know that in addition to that, he also consults people abroad. I know of some of the law firms he consults. I am concerned because this has to do with personnel.

We saw quite recently what appears to be a most unprecedented position taken in this country in respect of the award of Silk. [*Interruption*] I may speak in my Palo Seco brogue, but please excuse me. I do not know if you are that way

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inclined, but I did not refer to that. I want to keep it at a different level today. I mean the awarding of Silk to persons who have been elevated to Senior Counsel. We called them QCs in the colonial days.

I am a member of the Honourable Society of Lincoln's Inn and I know that Silk is normally awarded to lawyers and barristers. However, in our case, the distinction between lawyers and barristers has been abolished. I think it is now attorneys-at-law. It is usually reserved for lawyers of some stature.

At one time, if a lawyer did not appear before the court, he could not get Silk. I am certain my learned friend from Princes Town is around somewhere waiting in the wings to be awarded Silk. They awarded Silk to a number of persons who—[*Interruption*] Yes, I know that. I knew that before you. Do not give me any assistance.

Mr. Speaker, I have been interrupted in midstream, but notwithstanding that, I remind the hon. Member for St. Joseph, the Minister of Infrastructure Development and Local Government, since we are talking about accounts, that yesterday, under Definite Matters of Urgent Public Importance, I brought to the attention of this honourable House, although I was not allowed to debate it, the dilapidated conditions of certain roads in the La Brea constituency, in particular, Pond Road and all that network of secondary roads in Aripéro.

I have written to the Minister about that already. I do not know if he has received the letter about Pond Road and other roads in Aripéro and Silver Stream. Moreover, there is all the network of roads in La Brea. He seems to be an energetic Minister so I am going to point out to him that people say that the roads in La Brea cannot be fixed, but that is not true. Fixing the roads involves a certain amount of engineering ingenuity.

I point out, in particular, Sobo Road, the Siparia/Erin Road from Los Bajos to Los Iros; Los Iros Road; Beach Road, Palo Seco. There is one little village for which I have great regard. It nestles in the centre of the oilfield between Palo Seco and Point Fortin. It is called the village of Lot 10, an agricultural village, but it is about to be marooned because of the existence of two landslides and the large, heavy trucks from Petrotrin keep travelling along that road and damaging it. Mr. Minister, I notice you have taken note of it, and I must thank you at least for giving that display of interest in your job. If you can give me some assistance so that my constituents can be relieved, I shall forever be grateful. It does not mean that I would not deal with you if the time comes, but I shall be grateful.

12.00 noon

Mr. Speaker, we were saying, do not let losers worry the Member. Those 2,100 votes come like 20,000 he was trying to get. I was busy helping another constituency. Do not let it disturb the Member. He must worry not about me and about how close he came, but worry—I am not going to use this Parliament to say that. Worry about something else I will tell him about later. *[Interruption]* No, I would not do it. He is not here and it is of no consequence.

We were talking about the Ministry of Legal Affairs and I was talking about senior counsel, Silk, QCs or however we care to call them. Normally QCs or senior counsel are appointed from lawyers, I think it is, of 10 or 15 years' standing, but they must have had some distinguished career at the Bar. The hon. Attorney General has taken the position that once someone holds a high government office in the public service, like Director of Public Prosecutions, Assistant Director of Public Prosecutions, Solicitor General or even parliamentary counsel, that person should be given that honour. I note that the Law Association has taken objection to that, Mr. Speaker, and the not so kind will say—and I do not refer to Mr. Ranjee Dolsingh when I speak about Silk.

Mr. R. L. Maharaj: Who do you refer to?

Mr. H. Breaux: I do not refer to him. I take him out in terms of the length of time. *[Interruption]* No, I will not do that. Mr. Speaker, the view has been expressed that by elevating these unqualified, in my view, attorneys, to hold the position of Silk, it allows them to earn some more money, with which I do not disagree, but also it makes them beholden to the government of the day. It is said that that is why there is such protracted action in bringing the necessary charges against certain other persons involved in fraud and involved in sworn false statutory declarations, both at the level of the Parliament and elsewhere. So I want the Director of Public Prosecutions to know that we do not buy the nonsense that he is talking about, the inability to get information from Canada and from the United States, because we passed a law in this House which allows the Government quite simply and easily to get that information. If they asked for it and if it had been asked for properly, they would have had it.

The hon. Attorney General is a brilliant lawyer. He knows—*[Interruption]* No, the Member should not worry about that. He could put it. I say, Mr. Speaker, and the country is calling upon—you see, the Constitution as I said before, this Government uses the Constitution not for illumination but like a drunk uses a

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lamp post, not for illumination but for support. So all the time when they must obey the Constitution and the law they swear hollowly here to uphold the Constitution and the law but when the time comes they do not obey the Constitution and the law. If they had obeyed the Constitution and the law, Mr. Speaker, at best there would have been 17 in this House because the Constitution is quite clear.

Mr. R. L. Maharaj: Read it, read it.

Mr. H. Bereaux: No, I am not going to read it because he will then tell me it is *sub judice*. He will then tell me what I am going to read from the Constitution—do not try that. Let me tell him something. If he and I were in school together at the same time the best he would have come out was about fifth because all four places ahead would have been reserved for me. [Laughter] [Desk thumping]. So as I was saying, Mr. Speaker—[Interruption]

Mr. Assam: “Hedgie, you are at your best”. Bereaux the best!

Mr. H. Bereaux: No; I am just being polite and very humble. So we have to be very careful about how we are dealing, Mr. Speaker.

Look at something. I see here we have the Industrial Court, and what is it saying? Personnel expenditure \$178,395—not enough personnel or they have not spent. I went to the Industrial Court. They said here that they moved that money and put it in “Allowances”. I tried to get some documents from the Industrial Court, an affidavit sworn by a particular gentleman by the name of Tony Deyal. I was unable to get it from the Industrial Court so I am forced to refer to it from the *Mirror* newspaper. Now, I have no friends in the *Mirror*. The hon. Attorney General has.

Mr. R. L. Maharaj: You took them away from me, man.

Mr. H. Bereaux: It says here in this *Mirror*, “When Petrotrin boss Wanted President’s House to pay for Robinson’s visit”, but that is not the big one. Tony Deyal, “Oil Company spends State \$\$ on UNC campaign”. I mean, we knew that, Mr. Speaker. In my own constituency they came and I saw Gordon Bartlett, the Chairman of Trinmar, and a number of other persons. Just before the election they walked into Sobo, La Brea, and they promised to build a court, and the court is built, you know. I am so glad.

Mr. Assam: Courthouse?

Mr. H. Bereaux: A court, basketball court. *[Interruption]* No, no, no, basketball court—in the same place where Logie and a number of other people were. They came, they promised a basketball court and they started a few weeks, maybe a week or so before the election, and their patron saint, Mr. Ryan, he went around telling them, “You see what I could do? I will build the court”. I sat and I told the people—*[Interruption]*

Mr. Sudama: Who is Ryan, Selwyn Ryan?

Mr. H. Bereaux: Yes him, Sandy Ryan.

Mr. Sudama: Selwyn Ryan the patron saint of the PNM?

Mr. H. Bereaux: Possibly. Anything the Member wants. I am not arguing with him on those things. Those are not relevant. All I am saying, Mr. Speaker, is that they came and they spent the money, they built the court and I am here and I am certain that when you add—I am here with the opportunity to represent the people for another term and it does not matter who they try to bring or what they do. As I told the people in a meeting in Palo Seco, “I will take out your teeth without cocaine. I will beat you by five votes. I will take out your teeth without cocaine”. So if he wants to talk about how close, let him consistently come close because that is all—*[Interruption]*

Dr. Khan: Where is this violent talk going—violence to violence?

Mr. H. Bereaux: Do not worry. That is Palo Seco brogue. Let the Member speak in his mid-Atlantic brogue; I will speak in my Palo Seco brogue.

Mr. Speaker: Let me remind the Member he has three more minutes.

Mr. H. Bereaux: I have three more minutes; thank you, Mr. Speaker. All I want to point out is, Mr. Speaker, that Tony Deyal indicated that for various articles and various advertising paraphernalia and payment of advertising agencies—and this he did in an affidavit and filed in the Industrial Court—Petrotrin paid for those things. Now we understand what has been happening.

Finally, Mr. Speaker, I want to warn Trinidad and Tobago—and I am not warning them about any action which we would take—that it has come to my attention that inducements are being paid, offered to persons, to poison the President. The reports I have received are that it has come from the camp opposite to this party. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Singh: Did you report it to the police?

Mr. H. Breaux: I am not that stupid to report it to the police. I have already made that information available where steps can be properly taken to protect the life of the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Member: Lie.

Mr. R. L. Maharaj: Not even your own people clapped you.

Mr. Speaker: I think this is a good time to break for lunch. This sitting is now suspended until 1.30 p.m.

12.14 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

1.30 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

The Minister of Infrastructure Development and Local Government (Hon. Carlos John): Mr. Speaker, as I rise to make my maiden contribution in this honourable House on the Finance (Variation of Appropriation) (1999/2000) Bill, 2001, I would first like to place into the record of the *Hansard* my heartfelt thanks to the constituents of St. Joseph who overwhelmingly and strongly endorsed my candidacy and, by virtue of their endorsement, I stand here today. I want to pay public tribute to them. Also, to say, Mr. Speaker, that this victory was more noteworthy, in my respectful view, when one takes into consideration the resources that were employed by the other side, led by the Member of Parliament for San Fernando East. It shows clearly the tenacity, vigilance and commitment of the people of St. Joseph to ensuring that good representation continues to be at their disposal.

Mr. Speaker, I want to deal with infrastructure which seems to have been very much en vogue in the contributions of the various speakers on the other side and, in particular, the disquiet from time to time regarding tendering procedures and so forth.

On my assumption to ministerial office during our first term on May 22, 2000, I was charged with the responsibility for a National Road Enhancement Programme. Shortly thereafter, my colleague, the then Minister of Works and Transport, wrote to each Member of Parliament and I repeat, each Member of Parliament, asking him or her to outline at least 10 roads in each constituency that required immediate attention. That would be 360 roads. We asked each Member at that time to identify five priority roads which would have been 180 roads. We set about the task, regardless of the fact that we had not received submissions from every Member of Parliament. Every Member from the then government side responded. There were a few exceptions on the Opposition side.

I am pleased to say, Mr. Speaker, that in six months, starting July 1, 2000, to December 31, 2000, the National Road Enhancement Programme achieved a national record in paving and enhancing 1,055 roads. [*Desk thumping*] When my colleague, the then Minister of Works and Transport, came into office in late 1995, he was faced with a 15-year backlog of road maintenance. The records are all available right there in the Ministry for anyone to peruse. So we set about the task of a National Road Enhancement Programme simply to catch up on the neglect and abandonment of the country's infrastructure that had taken place under previous administrations, namely those who sit on the other side who wish to now put us under a guilt trip as though we are not doing enough for the country.

I am sorry that the Member for La Brea is not here, because this morning in his contribution he was calling out road for road; Pond Road in Aripero, Sobo Road, the roads in Silver Stream, Los Bajos, Los Iros, and so forth. The Member for La Brea knows that he is in his third term representing that constituency. If after three terms in office he boasts of firm endorsement from the electorate, and that is the condition of the roads, when he and his government were once in power, he has no one else to blame but himself and those who were in government at the time for the condition of the roads. [*Desk thumping*]

So this Minister will not be put on a guilt trip and not feel guilty about the condition of the roads in any constituency where there was abandonment through no fault of ours. I want to put that on the record. As soon as a road shows a little crack, they want to blame the UNC when they have done nothing at the level of infrastructure in this country to ensure that we have the basic infrastructure in place, so that we can commute day and night without the hindrance of potholes.

We said it on the platform and I say it here again, our performance can withstand the test of time because it beats old talk any time. [*Desk thumping*] To date, we have achieved in the month of January alone, 86 roads up to a while ago when I checked with the engineers at the Ministry of Infrastructure. We are going well, and more than that, I want to deal with the process, because to date, since the project has started, no one has been able to stand up and question the process because we operate, as the lawyers, my friend, the Member for Caroni East, and the Attorney General would say, *uberma fidei*; that is, utmost transparency. That is how we operate.

Mr. Valley: That is utmost good faith.

Hon. C. John: I will not lose focus with the Member for Diego Martin Central. I will continue with my point. We have been transparent in all that we have done in terms of operating this programme. As soon as we announced the programme, we called in the former president of the Contractors' Association, who is very vociferous and strong on procedure. I will call his name, I have nothing to hide. He is Mr. Emile Elias. We worked out a plan whereby there would be utmost transparency as we went ahead with the programme.

We agreed on one figure and that as they reached successful completion meeting our quality standards, they would go on to the next one. It is there for all to see. At the end of this programme we will have a financial audit done by an independent firm of Auditors and to be laid in this Parliament. We have absolutely nothing to hide. On the contrary, we have everything to be proud of because this Government does business differently from how they did it. That was the past.

The National Road Enhancement Programme is simply maintenance. We are just catching up. Let us talk about the vision for the Ministry of Infrastructure. Immediately after the Tobago House of Assembly elections next week, we will turn to the vision for the country's infrastructure. A stakeholder consultation will be held in Trinidad and a separate stakeholder consultation will be held in Tobago. We will consult with stakeholders, members of the Chamber of Commerce, the Manufacturers' Association, the Engineering Association, the architects, members of the public. From every sphere of national life, they will have an input into a public symposium on whither goest the country's infrastructure, so that we will now fashion the country's infrastructure along the projected economic growth for the country for the long term.

It is no longer *vaille que vaille* planning. At the end of our symposium we will map out the plan for the next 10 to 15 years and come to this Parliament and say this is what the public wants. It is not our plan. It is the public's plan! They have put us here and we respect that. We will then deliver in accordance with that long-term plan. If the Minister of Infrastructure Development and Local Government is not living up to the expectations and objectives of the plan, then he, the Minister, will know when the amputation curve is coming. He will not have to wait for his appointment to be revoked. That is how we do business on this side; methodical, organized, accounting to the people.

I see my friend, the Member for Diego Martin Central, is a bit lost and I expect him to be lost because of this new way of doing business.

Mr. Valley: Laughing I am laughing I hear better cock than you crow.

Hon. C. John: Our stakeholder consultation will involve the people and the people will decide what are the infrastructural requirements for the nation. At the same time, I think that my colleague, the Minister of Labour, Manpower Development and Industrial Relations will deal with this. The Unemployment Relief Programme (URP) formerly came under the Ministry of Local Government and that element has now been transferred to the Ministry of Labour, Manpower Development and Industrial Relations.

So we are getting away from the dependency syndrome, the handout syndrome that has been inculcated into people who want to better their lives and better their lot in life. They are the ones who have come to us and said, "We cannot take it any longer. We cannot go on this way. It cannot be business as usual". We want to uplift them and improve their self-esteem, and we are going to revolutionize the Unemployment Relief Programme as they knew it into an employment training programme. My colleague, the Minister of Labour, Manpower Development and Industrial Relations will deal with that in more detail. We will not leave them downtrodden with no hope, drifting to have an impact on the escalation of crime in the country. We are going to concentrate on self-development, retraining and retooling them so that they will feel part and parcel of the fabric of this society. That is how we do business on this side of the House in Government.

I remember the hon. Prime Minister said this morning that we got over 300,000 votes, a resounding endorsement, and we intend to honour our commitments to the people in fulfilling our mandate to provide goods and services so the population will enjoy a better quality of life and a higher standard of living at the end of our second consecutive term. We are not into the venom and vulgarity we experienced yesterday. We are into performance and fulfilling our mandate. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, I dwelt a while ago on the roads that were paved in the various areas and the Member for Diego Martin West was enquiring yesterday why certain roads were paved. One road that he singled out was Long Circular Road. We on this side of the House operate in a way where we are proactive. We do not wait until we see depressions in the street and then send in engineers and a crew.

Our engineers in the Ministry of Infrastructure Development and Local Government did some tests, we saw the depressions, saw what was happening and monitored the traffic flows and decided it was time to take some preventive

action. That is why Long Circular Road has been paved. It was not done *vaille que vaille*. It was done because we do not want to be faced with a situation where we now have to block off a road when something happens.

Remember we inherited 15 years of abandonment in terms of upgrading the country's infrastructure. That is 15 years of absolutely no maintenance. We will not have it as business as usual. That goes for every single road, street or trace that they want to put before us and say we have neglected. When they ask why we have done it, we have done it after analysis. The same with the savannah. It is a lot more than meets the eye. There were depressions. Our engineers went out and said before we caused a catastrophe, let us take in front and put the infrastructure in place so the public would have a minimum of inconvenience and hindrance. That is the sort of vision and foresight that is resident in the Ministry of Infrastructure Development and Local Government. Of course, they will not understand that, because we are a step ahead of them. We are ahead of the pack. There is no question about it. The results of December 11, 2000 speak for themselves. Then, I want to turn to the millennium interchange. Over 100,000 motor vehicles cross that interchange every day. People in this country have endured decades of tantrums, stress and toil, and bottlenecks each morning to and from work, leaving home at 3 o'clock and 4 o'clock in the morning. In 18 months' time that will be no more. Those frustrations will be a thing of the past.

1.45 p.m.

The travelling public coming from as far as Sangre Grande and Arima can leave home at 6.30 a.m., get into Port of Spain, and be home early with their families for enjoyment and recreation, to attend to their hobbies, go to the gym or go to classes. They would not have to spend all those hours on the road, bumper-to-bumper. The PNM was so uncaring about it; nobody cared. My colleague, the Member of Parliament for St. Augustine, was the one who engineered that new concept for the millennium interchange. In 18 months' time, all the woes of the travelling public will be over.

On top of that, one of the early mandates of the new Minister of Transport, my colleague, Sen. Jearlean John, would be to conceptualize and initiate a mass transit system. In the East/West Corridor, over 250,000 persons commute every day, and those people spend long, tireless, agonizing hours waiting for transportation. We intend to shuttle this public to school, to work and to recreation, with the minimum of delay in conditions that are suited for human beings and not animals. We are going to concentrate on a mass transit system and revolutionize transportation in this country between East, West, North and South.

Despite all the rhetoric on the other side, one of the things they must bear in mind is that since 1956 this country has held 10 general elections. Out of those 10, the National Alliance for Reconstruction has won one, and we have won two, so far. They have won seven. They have been there for 420 months; we have been there for 61 months; and when one looks at our record of 61 months in public office, I stand proud and honoured to be a Member of this side of the House. [*Desk thumping*]

I just wanted to put this in perspective given the disquiet, the ill will and rancour that was coming from the other side, regarding our projections, foresight and vision for the country's infrastructure. Never before in the history of this country have we seen such a plan and strategy to alleviate the pressures of the travelling public day to day. It was ignored and overlooked, and they know it. In fact, I am sorry that my friend, the Member for Diego Martin East, is not here.

Last night they had to cancel a reception in my honour in Diego Martin East—that is a fact—because they said that at long last they have a representative. Last night was cancelled because I was in Parliament. I have taken the bull by the horns and decided to upgrade the infrastructure of Diego Martin. For this month alone 33 roads were paved. Ask the Member for Diego Martin East. We can check it road by road. My calculation may be wrong, I will be short; it may be more than that. That is how we do business on this side of the House.

I just wanted to put in perspective that this is the tenure that will punctuate our term in office during the second term. You see, Mr. Speaker, in my view, service to country is service to God. This is the paradigm that will guide my stay in public office.

Thank you.

Mr. Kenneth Valley (*Diego Martin Central*): Thank you. Mr. Speaker, I join this debate at this time because of the issues raised over the last two days.

We are here to deal with a Finance (Variation of Appropriation) Bill. Apart from the fact that the variations suggest, to my mind, that we need to give some more authority to the Treasury or, perhaps, the Ministry of Finance, with respect to the write-off of sums, if one were to look at the documents before us one would see that we are talking about write-offs of small amounts, going back to a number of years. It seems to me that one of the things that we need to look at rather quickly is to provide increased authority to the Ministry of Finance and the Treasury to have authority to write off those small sums. While I would agree that the larger amounts ought to come to the Parliament, I really do not think that the Parliament should be wasting its time to be looking at write-offs of \$6,000, \$1,000 and so forth.

The other issues raised in the variation bill are simply issues of moving moneys within the particular Head, and really a clean-up act in order for the Auditor General to complete the audits of the accounts for 1999/2000. I do not think that any of us would have serious difficulty approving the Motion before us.

However, Mr. Speaker, over the last two days, there were a number of issues raised in this debate, and I believe that they warrant some comment. While doing that I want, first of all, to welcome the new Minister of Finance. I think the fact that we have a new Minister of Finance, and a Senator at that, puts the lie to what we have been hearing on the other side for quite some time, about the performance of the last Minister of Finance. I think, first of all, we need to ask if, in fact, the performance of the last Finance Minister was so good, how come he is not back with us?

We heard earlier today the Minister of Education speaking about five years of economic growth, but she also knows that that Minister of Finance had nothing to do with that. That Government had nothing to do with the fact that we had economic growth over the last five years. She knows that it was the policies of the People's National Movement government that really stimulated the economic growth. As my colleague, Dr. Rowley, said yesterday, the new Minister of Finance is now on his own; he is on his own. He would have to make his own magic, because over the last five years, the Government has done nothing, in spite of what the last speaker said. I would come to him in a minute, because he is new, and he has a lot to learn, but he does not know it. I will deal with him in a second.

Over the last five years, the Government failed to till the soil, so that they have put nothing in place to move the economy to the next level of growth, the point we have been making over the last five years. What we would be seeing, and what we are seeing quite clearly, as stated by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) last year, or rather as stated by the Government to the IMF last year, there is a slowdown in new projects coming to Trinidad and Tobago.

I am telling the new Minister of Finance, as we welcome him and as we expect that he would be much—I would not even say much, I would say be honest and be a person of integrity, having known him for some time—quite different from what any of us in this House can say of the last finance Minister, quite different; that he would have quite a lot of work to do if we are to continue to maintain the growth momentum which the People's National Movement government left. [*Desk thumping*] That is the reality of the situation.

As I am on that issue, perhaps I should deal with some of the issues raised by the Member for St. Joseph. Of course, he was speaking about the whole issue of pension portability; one of the issues he raised. In making that statement he went on to say that we should move to a contributory pension plan for the public service and have management by insurance companies and so on.

Mr. Speaker, simply, I want to tell the Minister of Finance that he needs to look at that extremely carefully, because obviously if you are moving from a non-contributory pension plan to a contributory plan, it means that you are also speaking about compensating the public servants for their now having to contribute to that pension plan. A non-contributory plan is a fundamental part of one's compensation package and, therefore, if, in fact, you are talking about moving from a non-contributory plan to a contributory plan, you are talking about increasing the compensation, first of all, of public servants to enable them to contribute to the plan.

While we agree that there ought to be pension portability for the public sector as well as the private sector, we cannot agree that the public sector pension plan should be managed by the private sector. Let us face it, if you do such a thing, there is a cost involved. The Government is the best credit in the host country; one has to understand that. If you are going to have a contributory plan, and to have all those funds available out there and, perhaps, the private sector managing that fund, lending it back to the Government by way of borrowing and so forth, this is a most inefficient system. I am sure if you look at it you would see that. While we agree with pension portability, we cannot agree with the private sector management of those pensions.

I would want to deal with some other issues. As I move away from finance, let me just make the point that the record of the Government, Mr. Minister of Finance, is five years of unplanned budget deficits. Every year the Minister of Finance came to the House promising us that there would be a surplus in the accounts. In fact, the surplus disappeared and we had deficits for five years, and we are expecting that that situation would change with your coming on board.

We had the situation too, Mr. Minister of Finance, when by subterfuge the Minister of Finance got \$69 million on to his friends at Maritime Life for thin air for the Winsure portfolio. Now that you are on board I ask that you look into that matter. I am asking you to take a close look at that matter, because I am saying that while that money has gone, at least, the Ministry of Finance can call for an auditing of the funds, and to the extent it has not been paid to policyholders, the excess funds, the surplus, ought to be returned to the Treasury.

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I am going to be reminding you about that, because immediately after those funds were paid, we saw newspaper articles that the United States was investigating certain persons for transferring funds to the United States. I feel certain that, perhaps, that is one of the reasons we are not seeing the Minister of Finance here any longer. I do not even think that the Cabinet knew when that \$69 million went across to Maritime Life. I am asking the Minister to look at that. [*Crosstalk*]

Concerning some of the other issues raised in this debate, the last speaker started his contribution by thanking the constituents of St. Joseph for voting for him overwhelmingly. Mr. Speaker, I think you know and he knows that that is not so. He knows that; he knows exactly what they did. He knows that some UNC persons from St. Ann's East were transferred to St. Joseph, and he knows that it is the supposedly PNM persons from St. Joseph who were transferred to St. Ann's East, who allowed him. All that evidence would go to the courts my friend.

2.00 p.m.

As I am on that, Mr. Speaker, coming out of the statement by the “Prime Minister” for the time being as it were this morning. Let me assure every Member on this side that the Members of the PNM respect institutions and that is why we have gone to the courts, we respect institutions and we would abide by the decisions of the court. I respect institutions, and we would also be taking our election petition with respect to St. Joseph, Baratavia/San Juan and Tunapuna to the courts and then you would be able to say whether those people in St. Joseph really voted for you, or whether you are here by fraud. [*Desk thumping*] If the court says you were here legitimately—

Mr. Sudama: Where will you find the money to do that?

Mr. K. Valley: Where I will find the money? Mr. Speaker, that is what they believe. They believe that their protection is the cost of justice in Trinidad and Tobago, that is what they believe, but they do not understand Trinidadians.

Similarly, yesterday we had the Member for St. Joseph thanking the people of San Fernando West and Tunapuna for voting for the supposedly Member for San Fernando West and the supposedly Member for Tunapuna. If you ask the Member for Oropouche, he would know that he should really thank the people from Oropouche and Naparima.

Mr. Sudama: On a point of order—Standing Order 36. The Member is casting aspersions.

Mr. K. Valley: What is your point? Are you waiting on a ruling from the Speaker?

Mr. Speaker: You said it is on a point of order, let me hear the point of order.

Mr. Sudama: Imputing improper motives.

Mr. Speaker: I do not think that is imputing improper motives, so please press on.

Mr. K. Valley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. This is a fair Speaker you know, you trying to bribe him, this is a fair Speaker. *[Desk thumping]* “Eh”, Mr. Speaker, they do not know you are a fair Speaker? *[Laughter]* *[Interruption]* You know we tape Speakers?

He should be really thanking the people from Naparima and Oropouche. *[Words Expunged]*. How do you think we know? I have a note to that effect, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Sudama: Mr. Speaker, on a point of order. The Member is misleading this House. *[Words Expunged]*. How could he make that statement?

Mr. Speaker: I think that is a serious allegation when you refer to the Member for Oropouche for moving. On the previous occasion you made a general statement, but you were very specific to the Member and I think that is incorrect so we will strike that off the record and ask the Member to continue.

Mr. K. Valley: Mr. Speaker, perhaps you did not hear clearly what I said. I said you should ask the Member for Oropouche who was telling everybody. *[Words Expunged]*. He was telling people that it was Sadiq. It was Sadiq he said who moved, and I will tell you his exact words. He said: “Sadiq was moving votes from Oropouche and Naparima into San Fernando West.” Mr. Speaker, that is what he said.

Mr. Speaker, my friend from Caroni East, in Tunapuna—listen, I have this evidence because I have on my computer at home the whole electoral list and if you run Tunapuna 2000 as against Caroni East 1995, you will see a big list of names, you will see a migration.

Mr. Assam: What about the migration from Arouca South to Tunapuna?

Mr. K. Valley: He comes thanking the people from Tunapuna, he cannot thank the people from Tunapuna. The people from Tunapuna wanted Eddie Hart to come to the House and they do not know how you reached here. You have to thank the people from Caroni East and Couva. You cannot thank the people from Tunapuna because they do not know how you got here. Then they are speaking about how they got over 300 votes. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Order please!

Mr. K. Valley: Mr. Speaker, this thing is a joke. They got over 300 votes because on election day—you know they are talking about my leader, the Member for San Fernando East and my colleague, the Member for Laventille West about their occupation. Mr. Speaker, I will tell you on election day there were a number of persons whose occupation was voter, because they were going all over the country voting from one polling station to another, and in every constituency there were certain polling stations earmarked that when you dip in the ink, it came off immediately. *[Interruption]* If I believe that? I am telling you, “yuh” think it easy.

Mr. Manning: The polling station where I voted was like that.

Mr. K. Valley: Mr. Speaker, ink coming off immediately, obviously known to those on the other side. So you had the voters going around making a circle and they boasted about it you know.

Mr. Speaker, I picked up the *Sunday Mirror* and they were talking about me. If the news could know when you run up your credit card, do you think people in Trinidad and Tobago would not know when you “tief” for an election? Ask anybody in Trinidad and Tobago, everybody knows you “tief” the election, and that is why we are saying that you lack legitimacy, and that is the fundamental problem of this Parliament today. *[Desk thumping]*

So the Prime Minister could come here and get on a high horse, but unless you have legitimacy we are going nowhere in Trinidad and Tobago, and that is the point I want to make first and foremost, because I consider it extremely important that we respect institutions. As a young nation we have a vested interest in building our institutions. We did everything to build our institutions. That is why my leader although—*[Interruption]* Of course we object to your being there and you know that, but we respect that institution of Speaker. We respect that institution of Speaker and we can give you the guarantee that we would respect that institution.

In fact, in 1991 when we came into the Government, the President we met in office, we left him there. We ensured that he would return because we said as a young nation we have to build institutions and we cannot be changing Presidents simply because a government changes. Similarly, we left and you were there with us we did the same thing with the Senate. We left the President of the Senate intact because it is extremely important for us that we build institutions as a young nation. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Speaker: Member for Tunapuna, I appeal to you to keep the levels down because I am having difficulty hearing, and I am looking at the *Hansard* recorder who is having difficulty as well. So I appeal for your cooperation.

Mr. K. Valley: Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. We can go on. We cannot just come here and tell a pack of untruths and feel that we are fooling the people because we are not, and I am saying today that if we are not careful we will end in anarchy. All the things he is talking about he is leading the charge to lead this country down that slippery slope and he needs to know it as Prime Minister. When he gets on a high horse and says if I say appoint, the President has to appoint, he has to be talking tomfoolery. When the Member for Couva South gets an opinion from somebody else—he is paying somebody to give him what he wants to hear first of all. If you ask the wrong question, you must get the wrong answer. If you ask whether the President has any decision as to whether he can appoint to the Senate someone who faced the polls and lost, anybody even I, would tell you no, but that is not the question. The issue is not whether someone who faces the polls and loses can go into the Senate, of course he can. The issue is whether an action taken in its totality can lead to a subversion of our democracy and that is what it is, and the basic issue the people of Trinidad and Tobago have to answer is whether a President must sit by and allow a Prime Minister to use the Constitution to subvert the democracy. I am saying that no President in a democratic country can sit by and allow any Prime Minister to use a democratic constitution to subvert the democracy, and that is the issue.

We must know that if a Prime Minister approaches a President to appoint seven losers to the Senate and makes them Ministers, that is a subversion of democracy because the whole concept of democracy talks about government by the people, and if the seven of them were rejected at the polls they cannot and ought not to be. While, of course, if you appoint one person to the Senate, that is not a subversion of the democracy, but if you do, and that is what one has to look at—*[Interruption]* You are tomfoolery all the time, talking nonsense. You do not even know what is right or wrong. The people rejected you in St. Joseph, you go to Tunapuna and “tief” the “bloody” election—I am sorry, Mr. Speaker—and come in here and parading. While you parade, everybody is laughing at you, do you not know that?

Mr. Assam: You said that in the last Parliament, they are laughing at you now.

Mr. K. Valley: They are laughing at me now? I remind you of Psalm 37:10. Mr. Speaker, quite simply, I am saying for whatever little time they remain on that side and it is going to be extremely short, I am simply asking them or those who have some decency—*[Interruption]* One does not expect anything from you, but for those who still have some decency about them, understand that in Trinidad and Tobago we have an obligation as a young democracy to do all in our power to strengthen our institutions and the Elections and Boundaries Commission, that is what it is.

2.15 p.m.

We have a motion on the Order Paper dealing with the EBC, so I do not want to deal with that now. I think that we in Trinidad and Tobago have pussy-footed around institutions. As I said, we respect institutions but we expect the holders of those offices to respect themselves also and if they fail to do that then we should tell them that they do not suit the office they hold. It is clear to us in the PNM that the level of voter fraud could not have taken place without the agreement of persons in the EBC, at very high levels. When I said that I got two editorials but I notice everybody is saying it now because everybody's eyes seemed to be opened suddenly.

It is difficult to be diplomatic with the non-British. If you try to use diplomacy with some people, they would not know what you are talking about; in such cases you had better pull out your two by four. When the EBC failed to use the tested method of the post to send out voters' cards, we should have known that something was wrong.

Poison Mas' Camp is opposite my constituency office and a week before the election they brought a whole pile of polling cards which somebody had just dropped there. The EBC could not post out the poll cards, I mean the dead persons who voted would never have gotten them, or the persons who are still abroad would not have voted, you understand.

They started saying that I was critical of the observers until somebody from the observer team had to say, "I have read what Mr. Valley has said and I do not take it as a criticism". At no time, as far as I am concerned, did I criticize the observer team. I said their mandate did not include where the padding was, the electoral list. I am sure they enjoyed their holiday. They walked around on election day, saw people voting and said everything was okay, they could not know at that time that the lists were padded, well padded, and that is what we are faced with.

This Government lacks legitimacy and in that position what they should really do is to make sure the EBC clean-up the lists quickly. You know that is what we are going to do as soon as we get over there, in another two weeks. We will take Ortoire/Mayaro and Pointe-a-Pierre first and when we are finished with that we are going for St. Joseph, we are going for Tunapuna and we are going for San Fernando West and Barataria/San Juan. You wait and see. Me, power hungry! You have not seen that I am enjoying myself? I simply want Trinidad and Tobago to be governed according to the laws and the norms to which we have been accustomed.

My Friend, the Member for St. Joseph, or who for the time being is sitting in the St. Joseph seat, must understand that if he is taking governmental office there are rules. He paved the savannah, the people made noise, but he is acting like the Minister of Finance, “choo pool” with them. There is a Tobago House of Assembly Act; he runs in Tobago like a bull in a China shop. I mean, what does he use for sense? Did he not consider that what he was doing was illegal or was he just spurred on by the Member for Couva North? He is loco long ago, you know, understand that. Have some reason. There were some of us who really thought —let me just say that I find his actions over the past two months a real disappointment. As a person whom I have known for a long time, as a person whom I like, I must say, if he continues in that way he will not last. He does not have to take my word for it, just wait and see. Do not take basket from them, that is all I am telling him. If he feels he has a contribution to make, he feels he has a job to do, just understand that there are rules and he cannot go about like a bull in a China shop.

Mr. Speaker, I will end as I started. We are respecters of institutions and that is why my political leader said on the night of December 11th, that the voice of the people is the voice of God, but when it became clear to us that it was not the voice of the people, it was the voice of thieves, scoundrels and so on, we had to say no, friend, this is not kosher. On the night of the elections we were prepared to say, if that is the will of the people, that is it, but when it became clear to us, within hours that they had stolen the elections, then we had to say there is no way that we are taking that and we are using the legal means. We have gone to the courts and we are going to win in the courts and they are going to be back over here as quickly as possible, where they rightly belong.

Mr. Speaker, I say once more that in my opinion, as a layman, the President is correct, that his responsibility is to ensure that Trinidad and Tobago remains a democracy. He has to ensure that our democracy is not subverted by any action

and the action of attempting to put seven losers in the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago can only be interpreted as a subversion of our Constitution and a subversion of our democracy, and he has a right to say 'no'. If they feel he is wrong—I heard somebody say that the election petition can be brought to Parliament. If they feel the President is wrong, bring him to Parliament.

I am following what is happening in the courts and I am laughing as I am seeing that the lawyers are only taking people's money, I wish it was me, I would have taken it and taken more. Unless we see our mission as one of building and strengthening institutions, we are leading this country down the slippery slope to anarchy. Thank you.

2.25 p.m.

The Minister of Communications and Information Technology (Hon. Ralph Maraj): Mr. Speaker, may I, before I begin, add my own words of congratulations to the new Members of this honourable House. Let me say that I am particularly pleased to enter the debate because, though it is a simple Motion dealing with variation of the appropriation, I think it has turned out, in my mind at least, to be a very, very important and serious debate. Because throughout the debate—and I am not going to be dealing here with the financial matters; I am not going to be dealing with issues relating to education and local government and so on, I am going to be dealing with the issue of democracy, the issue of the voter padding, the question of the Elections and Boundaries Commission and so on, which have arisen in this debate. Because I think there can be nothing more important to us in Trinidad and Tobago if question marks hang over our democracy. I think people on both sides of the House must be concerned.

Before I go on any further, let me also respond to something my good friend, the Member for Diego Martin Central, said, I suppose *en passant* about the constituency of Naparima somehow being involved in this alleged transfer of votes, and so on. The entire country knows—I made it abundantly clear in various forms of the media—my own feelings about this question of voter padding. I described it as unclean. I will so describe it again—unclean; one of the most dastardly acts one can ever commit in a democracy, is to pad a voters' list and to win an election by surreptitious, illegal, unlawful means. That is my position. I made that very, very clear.

I also made it absolutely clear that as far as I know, the constituency of Naparima was not involved in any illegal transfer of voters. At least they got no instructions from the Member of Parliament. No official; no individual, got any

instructions from the Member of Parliament to be involved. If any individuals from the constituency of Naparima participated in any way, planned, personal or individual, they did it without the knowledge and without the consent of the Member of Parliament.

That is my position. I speak this way because I think it is very serious; it is very important. Because in my view, all corruption is bad, but there is no corruption more evil than the corruption of a country's democracy. That is my position and I am sure it is the position of Members on this side of the House. Because democracy is freedom and there is nothing more precious in life than individual freedom. We often take it for granted, but there can be nothing more important to a nation than freedom of speech and thought, freedom of movement, freedom of worship, freedom of association, freedom of political persuasion, freedom of ownership of private property; all such freedoms exercised, of course, with respect for the law and the rights of others.

That is my position. That is the position, I am sure, of this side of the House. Democracy is the soul of healthy prosperous nations. In my view, the poorest of nations are rich where democracy reigns. Democracy is today, and has been for some time, the soul of Trinidad and Tobago. We therefore owe it to ourselves, our country and our children to speak out against the corruption of democracy, to speak out against the distortion of democracy, to speak out against the erosion of our democratic traditions whenever they exist.

We all know that the corruption of democracy is a very dangerous course. Once it starts, it can lead to inevitable bloodshed, chaos, confusion, breakdown of the society. History is littered with despots who have been destroyed. Of course, they have been destroyed after they ruin millions of lives. We have only recently, for example, seen—and when I say, recently, I mean just during the second half of the century—the collapse of the totalitarian regimes. We know, for example, that today there are only a handful of dictatorial regimes in the world today, and their lives are short-lived, because the rumblings are there within the society. I would not call their names; it might not be diplomatic for me to do so. The rumblings are there within the society which foretell the eventual demise of those nations.

Do you know why? The human spirit is born free. It is the condition of the human being to be free and no people and no individual will, for a long time, live under suppression and oppression. Nobody will. So it is a dangerous course to embark on any course of action which will lead to an erosion of the democratic system and the democratic process.

As I said before, the only problem with the fall of tyrants and the fall of despots is that they come sometimes after many years, after many lives are destroyed, after there is ruination throughout the country, and so on, because the corruption of democracy is not a sudden occurrence; it is a slow, corrosive process which begins in tentative steps and then moves incrementally, eating at the innards of a society. So it is important for us all to be alert. It is important for us on this side to continue to keep our eyes open; it is important for those on that side to keep their eyes open; it is especially important for the Parliament to keep its eyes open, and for all to be alert against any threat to the erosion of our democratic traditions, because when democracy is corrupted, the peace and the prosperity of a nation is endangered. We lose our freedoms. Our institutions break down. You see it happening. Justice then is manipulated. A reign of terror will begin, when your democracy is endangered.

What happens when a reign of terror begins? Individuals disappear; they are jailed; they are assassinated. Those are the implications for a breakdown of your democratic traditions. The people weep. Ruin is brought onto the country; darkness descends on the country. It is indeed a very dark time when we lose our democracy.

That is the position of us all on this side of the House. That ought to be the position of everybody in Trinidad and Tobago, if we are to ensure that this most precious resource of ours—our wealth is not our oil and gas, and so on, you know. That is not our wealth. That would mean nothing to us if we do not have our freedoms. It will mean absolutely nothing. So the most precious thing that we have in this country is, in fact, our democracy.

In my view, the most important expression of your democratic freedom is the conduct of free and fair elections. If there is any doubt over that, that is a sin. If anybody distorts that process, they have committed a sin against the people of Trinidad and Tobago. That is my position.

2.35 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, when we are talking about an election we are talking about a very sacred thing. It is a process through which a people come into a covenant with the group, party or government that will run their affairs. The vote is a sacred thing. It is a sacred thing. It is sacred because the vote is the only power which a poor man has. We who live at the upper levels of the society for one reason or the other, either by birth or achievement, have to remember that. For the poor people in Trinidad and Tobago who live ordinary lives—unknown and unsung—their only power is that of the vote. They do not walk the gilded corridors of power as we do. They do not drive in lovely cars as we do. They do not wine and dine as we do. They do not! Their only connection with power is through this vote!

That is why I am saying it is a very precious thing. Their vote is their fragile hope of influencing how their lives are governed. If that vote is stolen, if it is denied or corrupted, a great sin occurs. The people can become enraged. We have to be careful. Ours is a sacred trust to ensure that the votes of the people do count and that their voices are heard. That is what we ought to be doing! That, I am sure, is the position of this side of the House.

Stealing an election is wrong. If any election is stolen in Trinidad and Tobago, that wrong must be put right! That is my view and I am sure, it is the view of this side of the House. We have a situation in Trinidad and Tobago where allegations of voter padding have been levelled against this Government and the party to which I belong. We have a situation where charges have been laid against people for voter padding and they have appeared in the courts. Cases have already been heard. You have the Opposition making all these ponderous charges, claiming to have all the evidence and citizens are wondering how true all of this is.

The police themselves are conducting investigations and I am pleased to hear that they are conducting their investigations. I have made it known from the very start that the police must not be impeded in any way from conducting their investigations because this thing has to be cleared up. This cloud which threatens to hang over Trinidad and Tobago must be cleared up! The police must be given additional resources if they need them to conduct this inquiry [*Desk thumping*] because it will do Trinidad and Tobago no good if we are to go into the future with this dark cloud—this wound—festering as we move into the future. That is my position, and that, I am sure, is the position of this side of the House.

Mr. Speaker, may I also say that the question of the Elections and Boundaries Commission must also be addressed. I grew up in a society in Trinidad and Tobago where elections have been conducted and lived with total trust and faith in this body being able to conduct our affairs. I do not say that my faith is lost, but questions are being asked. The Member for Diego Martin Central raised some questions. Letters to the Editors in the newspapers and editorial commentators—some of them by non-political people—are also raising questions about the EBC and its capacity for verification and whether it needs more resources to conduct free and fair elections. People are asking questions. We cannot conduct our democracy if one of the bulwarks of our democracy, the Elections and Boundaries Commission, is being seen in this negative way of being not quite capable of conducting its elections properly.

The EBC is the guardian of our democracy. It is that final protective barrier between the voter and the political parties and any intention on anybody's part to do anything wrong. I am saying that since we have now come to a point where there are questions hanging over the EBC, let us ensure that it does have the resources required to operate properly, completely and thoroughly in the future. That, I am sure, is the position of this side of the House.

That is my position, Mr. Speaker, and I thank you for allowing me to share these thoughts with you.

Mr. Martin Joseph (*St. Ann's East*): Mr. Speaker, I intend to make a brief intervention in this debate but unlike my colleague from Naparima who said that he was going to stay clear of some of the financial matters and deal with the question of democracy, the Elections and Boundaries Commission, voter padding and some of the other issues.

Mr. Speaker, at this sitting of the new Parliament, I must compliment the Member for Naparima for his contribution in this House. [*Desk thumping*] I am not afraid to say that he gave me goose pimples. I have listened over the last two days to contributions, especially from the other side, and I was a bit concerned. Like my colleague, I do not intend to go into any details with respect to the EBC because there is a motion coming some time later in the month at which time I intend to be very extensive. Over the last three years I have been one of those persons, fortunately or unfortunately, to have been interfacing with the EBC in my capacity as General Secretary of the People's National Movement. I am very familiar with some of the issues that I have brought to the attention of the EBC over the last three years and the final outcome, but, as I said, at a later debate I would give details.

Mr. Speaker, I do not want to touch what the Member for Naparima has said because I believe he has dealt with some of those issues in a way that nobody else could have dealt with them, especially coming from that side. I hope Members on both sides listened carefully, because clearly he was making an appeal. He kept saying that it was his position and also the position of those on the other side.

Mr. Speaker, I consider myself to be a young parliamentarian as the last five years was my first term. When I came into this House I felt honoured to be elected, as the representative in Parliament, by the people of St. Ann's East. We have had our challenges in Opposition in trying to represent our constituents. Because of the difficulties we have had to face in terms of providing resources, ensuring that the aspirations and needs of the people of the constituencies that we represent were brought to the attention of the government and because of the way in which our system operates, it was very difficult. As you know,

Opposition Members of Parliament do not have resources. Opposition Members of Parliament can make representation on behalf of the constituents and it is left to the Ministers of Government to determine whether or not they are going to entertain the requests being made. These requests are not on our personal behalf, but on behalf of the members of the constituencies we represent.

Mr. Speaker, this UNC Government has been very unique in terms of how it has treated with Opposition Members of Parliament and this varies depending on who the Minister was. Some ministers were much more accommodating than others. The reason I am saying all that is because when we went to the polls just recently, constituents were made to believe that their Members of Parliament failed them in that they did not represent them. I have heard Government Ministers saying that Opposition Members did not represent. I heard the Member for St. Joseph, a while ago, talking about the Member for La Brea and the state of the roads and that it is his fault the roads in La Brea are in a particular way. We know better than that. We know very much better than that.

2.45 p.m.

The reason I am saying all that is that if we allow what is being contemplated in terms of the seven persons who faced the polls and lost, also being in the Executive, it is going to undermine our democracy. They know that. This is what frightens one—the fact that they know if this happens what it will do to our democratic process.

“Oh, the Constitution does not say that if you fail at the polls and lose you could not be appointed to the Senate.” I do not think the framers of the Constitution felt that they needed to say that. As my colleague from Diego Martin Central just said, it is not about one or two, but it is seven. What is the intention as it relates to that?

It was a breath of fresh air when I heard the Member for Naparima raising some concerns. He said that this was a very important debate; and the level of this debate just went up a couple of notches with his contribution. He said that his concerns were democracy, the Elections and Boundaries Commission, voter padding and some other things.

Mr. Speaker, let me shift. I said I was going to be brief and I am going to be. Let me shift my concerns in terms of this debate. There is a proposal, under the Ministry of National Security, to vary some \$16 million. In terms of the explanation provided, the intention is that \$11.43 million be varied from savings

that were supposed to have occurred as a result of—and the explanations given—agreement to the payment of an increase to members of the Defence Force, which was only finalized towards the end of the fiscal year; and that the transfers to the areas to which the \$11.43 million were being shifted were necessary to:

- (a) increase the 1999/2000 provision to meet the strategic intelligence agency salaries, contract gratuities and miscellaneous intelligence activities;
- (b) pay sums owed to the National Petroleum Marketing Company for goods and services supplied in 1998/1999 that were unpaid and subsequently charged to the 1999/2000 estimates; and
- (c) pay creditors for the supply of goods and services such as food, dental and medical services.

There is where the increases were required, but savings to facilitate this transfer were identified under Sub-head 01: Personnel Expenditure. An allocation was made under this sub-head to facilitate the increase in salaries to members of the Defence Force. Agreement on the payment of that increase was only finalized toward the end of the fiscal year.

I am raising this because I consider this to be so important. Earlier today, almost in a show of force—that is the only way one can characterize that—I saw the heads of the protective services. I am sure I saw Brigadier Sandy. I think I saw Lieutenant Colonel Peter Joseph. I think I saw the Acting Chief of Police. That is how I interpreted it—a show of force—I may be wrong.

It is unfortunate that here are soldiers whose salaries were to have been paid last year and were not, and the explanation given here was that \$11 million went across to those areas I had identified. I want to put on record the importance of the non-payment of these salary increases. It does not seem that anyone can speak for the soldiers.

There is an editorial in the *Newsday* of December 23, 2000, headed “Upsetting the Soldiers”. With your leave, Mr. Speaker, I will read parts of that editorial:

“The Government cannot take the morale and esprit de corps of members of the Regiment for granted. The soldiers who are responsible for protecting and preserving the security of our country deserve to be treated by the State with respect and an overt sense of appreciation. Our memories cannot be so short that we forget the crucial role the Army played in dealing with the Muslimeen insurrection of July 1990 or the revolt of the soldiers at Teteron in 1970, stemming from a range of grievances.

That is why we consider as quite unfortunate the failure of the Government to pay members of the Regiment and the Coast Guard the backpay that was promised them several months ago. Members of these two arms of the Defence Force were expecting to receive at least part of their backpay in time to meet their Christmas expenses.

However, the soldiers were informed at a parade summoned by the Chief of the Defence Force Brigadier John Sandy that there was a delay in the payments which would not now be made before Christmas.

Brigadier Sandy told his men that the initial offer by the Chief Personnel Officer was to pay 75 percent of the moneys owing to them before Christmas. This figure was later reduced to 50 per cent and then to 37 per cent. Earlier this week, they learnt that no payments would be made before Christmas.

We understand the reason given for the delay was a bureaucratic foul-up, but this is difficult to accept having regard to the time that was available for arranging these pay-outs. It is only natural then for the soldiers and coast guardsmen to feel a deep sense of grievance over the failure of the State to fulfil its pre-Christmas backpay promises.

According to reports reaching *Newsday* there have been rumblings within the ranks of the Regiment and the situation at the army headquarters at Teteron has been described as “tense”.

In our view, this is an unhealthy scenario that should not have arisen. How could the Government treat the soldiers and coastguardsmen in this cavalier fashion? With respect to this commitment, money could hardly be the problem having regard to the significant increase in income derived from high oil and gas prices.”

2.55 p.m.

“As we said before, it is important to maintain a high morale within the ranks of the Defence Force in the interest of the country’s security. History tells us that sudden threats to the country’s peace and stability can arise at any time and, in these crises, we can only rely on the loyalty and commitment of our men and women in uniform.

In any case, we believe the majority of members of the Regiment and Coast Guard are family men with children who were expecting to meet the additional expenses of Christmas with their backpay. We expect that the Government will now appreciate the situation that has arisen and proceed to treat this matter with urgency, paying the soldiers at least before the season ends.”

Finance Committee Report
[MR. JOSEPH]

Tuesday, January 23, 2001

Now, this editorial was written on Saturday, December 23. Well, the Christmas season, for those of us who understand the Christmas season, is supposed to end by January 6.

I looked at a not very reputable newspaper, but the Sunday headline of the *TnT Mirror* Newspaper says, “Panday Facing Revolt”. Let me just read the first two parts that basically say:

“Members of the Defence Force...”

This is Sunday, January 21, 2001. The editorial I just read was Saturday, December 23, 2000 and the editorial in its ending urged the Government to try to pay the back-pay by the end of the Christmas season. The editorial also indicated that the reason given for the non-payment of the back-pay was some bureaucratic—how did they characterize it—foul-up. I do not know if this can be characterized as a bureaucratic foul-up; but let me turn to Sunday’s *TnT Mirror* Newspaper, which is Sunday just gone. The headline says, “Panday Facing Revolt”.

“Members of the Defence Force are prepared to have their wives march for them in protest over Government’s refusal to pay them millions of dollars in backpay.”

So it means that as of today the back-pay owed to soldiers and coast guard persons have not been paid.

All I am asking the hon. Minister of Finance to tell this honourable House is, when soldiers can be expected to be paid their back-pay in light of the variation of \$11 million on which I focused, which was scheduled to take care of that back-payment and instead went to taking care of meeting the strategic intelligence agency salaries, sums owed to National Petroleum Marketing Company for goods and services supplied and the payments to creditors for supply of goods and services such as food, dental and medical services. That is my brief contribution and I hope that the Minister of Finance will be able to give this honourable House an undertaking as to when soldiers’ back-pay will be paid. I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj): Mr. Speaker, I think that the religious people who were present at the opening of this Parliament and prayed for us would be very disappointed if they knew of the standard of our debate in this House. The Motion before us has to do with proposals for the expenditure from the public revenue

which were not included in the annual estimates 1999/2000. There has been so much venom and feelings of hatred and of war generated in this Parliament that it seems as though we have forgotten the peace which was prayed for. I would like to make a special appeal that, yes we can disagree, yes we have different views, but I think that we owe it to ourselves and to the nation to conduct the nation's business better.

Mr. Speaker, if you will permit me, before I deal with some of the serious allegations which have been made, I would just like to read from some of the prayers which were offered on that day.

“O Lord our Governor, bless the leaders of our land, that we may be a people at peace among ourselves and a blessing to other nations of the earth.”

[*Interruption*] Mr. Speaker, why is he not interested in listening to God's word?

Mr. Assam: He is a born-again Christian.

Hon. R. L. Maharaj: Mr. Speaker:

“May we serve our people and our country as devotion to the Lord of lords.”

Mr. Speaker, another prayer from the Muslim community:

“We pray O God, that the noble and worthy Constitution which you have given us through the wisdom granted our forebears may be honored by all in its lofty ideals of individual rights and justice.”

Here we have a Constitution and laws which say that if, for example, there is a problem about voter padding and there are allegations of it, the Constitution provides machinery for dealing with it. The Constitution expressly says that Trinidad and Tobago would be a sovereign democratic republic. It expressly provides that fundamental rights are guaranteed. It expressly provides that, insofar as elections are concerned, there is an Elections and Boundaries Commission. If there are allegations of fraud, the laws and the Constitution expressly provide that there will be an election petition and, until those matters are determined in the courts, the candidates who have been declared winners would take their seat. That is not the Member for Couva South saying that, Mr. Speaker. That is the law. That is the Constitution. The reason the Constitution provides that, is such that people would not do anything to undermine or corrupt the democratic process of Trinidad and Tobago.

We, Mr. Speaker, took an oath when we came here to uphold the Constitution and the law and, if we have that machinery, what is the purpose of our coming here and saying that “You all are illegitimate, there was voter padding, there was fraud, you all t’ief the election”? What is the result of that? What is the aim of that? Is it not to undermine and subvert the Constitution? Mr. Speaker, even before the general election—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I really am grateful to the hon. Attorney General for giving way. I wonder if the Government would be prepared, since, as he is suggesting, they have clean hands in this matter, to establish a commission of inquiry into the operations of the Elections and Boundaries Commission with specific reference to the conduct of the general election of the year 2000.

Hon. R. L. Maharaj: Mr. Speaker, as the hon. Member knows, that is the subject of substantive debate, but what I would say is, when that time comes he would hear. The Government has nothing to hide, as the Member for Naparima says. As a matter of fact, before the general election, the record of this House would show that, when questions were asked about allegations of voter padding, I got up in this House and said that, if the police were to find evidence they should prosecute, because we believe in law, the courts, justice and the Constitution.

However, Mr. Speaker, what I am also saying is that apart from a commission of inquiry, the law provides, for example, the elections and—the Representation of the People Act provides for offences. It provides that if there were any fraud whatsoever, apart from criminal prosecution there can be an election petition for the courts to declare the election invalid and the person would not be able to be elected. The law provides that—the courts. We cannot be judges of the facts unless we decide to abandon the courts and, Mr. Speaker, as we stand here and as the other side knows, there were four election petitions filed. Not one had to do with fraud at the election.

The four election petitions had to do with whether a person made a false declaration or not; nothing to do with voter padding and nothing to do with whether people were moved from one constituency to another constituency, and those matters are before the courts. As we stand here, the matter in which the PNM candidates have legal representation is being argued nearby. The State has representation because there was a constitutional motion filed and the lawyers for the State were brought from the United Kingdom—totally independent—to appear on behalf of the State. The Attorney General took the position that the matter is not on a political basis or even a parliamentary basis, based on a case called the *Director of Public Prosecutions and Brooks*—he is the guardian of the public interest—to provide a lawyer to assist the court in resolving the matter; and those matters are before the court.

So, Mr. Speaker, why would we come here in a debate which has to do with transfer of one set of money from one Head to another and to give approval, yet for the whole debate we make it look as if the judge has decided the matter? As the Member for Naparima has said, in countries where this has occurred and where there are irresponsible people in certain positions, one can have a country going to ruin. Since the other side has spoken about being “committed to law, committed to the Constitution and committed to the rule of law”, I would like to appeal to them that, whilst the matter is pending, they should decide to let us accept what the law says.

The law says—it is not the Speaker, not the Government and not the Opposition, but the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago decided that if such a situation exists, the Member of Parliament should take his seat and be deemed legally elected until the court declares otherwise. So I know that the Opposition knows that there is no question of illegitimate government or illegal government. As far as the law and the Constitution are concerned, the Government is constitutional and legal. Democracy can be corrupted, I agree. That is the position on this side, democracy can be corrupted when there are unfounded allegations which have not been translated into evidence and they are used at this level of the House and we allow the newspapers and the public to consume them.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is my duty to put on record that there are people who are charged with criminal offences. If this Parliament allows these allegations to be made and published—there is a book called *Abuse of Process and Fairness in Criminal Proceedings*. In relation to the last five years, there are cases where the law has developed to the point where, even before cases are entered into, before the court determines truth or guilt or innocence, if publications have been made in criminal matters which prejudice the fair trial of the matter, the court has the jurisdiction to strike out the criminal process. So if there are persons who are charged and if, for some reason, through publications it can be shown that those publications can affect the fair trial of those matters, in this Parliament we are going to be doing a disservice to the prosecution process by giving ammunition for the contention to be made that the prosecution is an abuse of process.

I would just like to put this on record, to show how this law has developed. At one time the courts said that when there is a criminal trial, whatever happened before is of no consequence as to whether one is guilty or innocent. The law has developed that if, for example, the press has published matters in which the public has consumed those things and a fair trial is not possible, the courts would strike out the prosecution or postpone the trial for two or three years.

Mr. Speaker, we remember the famous matter of Dole Chadee recently in the judicial committee of the Privy Council. The Privy Council was at pains to say that attorneys general and DPPs have an obligation that, when there are criminal prosecutions and there are publications from whichever source, their attention should be drawn to them and the authorities could decide whether the risk should be taken for the prosecution process to fail or for the public interest to succeed by refraining from making statements which would prejudice a fair trial.

3.10 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, for the record of the Parliament, I will not read it. The case is *Nankissoon Boodram vs. the Attorney General* and another, 1995, 47 West Indian Reports. Page 459 is the judgment and the passage is at page 493 at letters (c) to (h).

Mr. Speaker, it is my duty to also mention to this honourable House that in relation to what I have just said, the Director of Public Prosecutions considered it his duty yesterday to draw attention to the public about these allegations which have been made in respect to two particular matters and the principle applied to other matters, obviously. The DPP, at the last paragraph of his statement said:

“The DPP wishes to advise that this matter is still very much under police information. Extensive references such as there have been to the supposed criminal liability of Messrs. Peters and Chaitan could be regarded as being prejudicial to the outcome of this matter and should cease in the paramount interest of maintaining the integrity of the criminal justice system.”

If we as law makers and we as people have to set example, and we can sit here and know what the law is and what the Constitution says, what our duties are and we know that not only the hon. Member for Ortoire/Mayaro, but the hon. Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, as far as the Constitution and the law are concerned, make them the elected Members of this House, but we use parliamentary privilege to call them thieves, dishonest, to, in effect, say that they are illegally elected and to have those statements published, Mr. Speaker—

Mr. Manning: No, no, no. Not at all. We did not say that.

Hon. R. L. Maharaj: What we are doing, apart from undermining the Constitution itself, is that we are going to pollute the criminal justice system. Mr. Speaker, the next matter has to do with persons who are charged for voter padding. May I say that I know that you have granted a lot of latitude in these matters and I did not get up because I knew that the other side knows what the law is and what the principles are, but what I want to say and put on this record is that what has been stated by the other side can be the basis—

Mr. Boynes: And the Member for Naparima!

Hon. R. L. Maharaj: The Member for Naparima did not deal with the facts. He dealt with general principles. What has been stated by the other side can be grounds, ammunition which can be used—I do not know whether successfully or not—in order to say that the prosecution process has been contaminated. It is based on that, I want to appeal to the hon. Member for San Fernando East and his party in Opposition to understand, and as one who has held the office of Prime Minister, that problems can be dealt with under the Constitution and the laws.

As the hon. Prime Minister said today, if the courts decide ultimately—I really do not understand whether somebody on that side is being misled. I heard today that the hon. Member for Diego Martin Central said, “There is a Prime Minister for the time being. In two or three weeks, we are there”. Let me put on record what is happening. There are four election petitions. Two filed against the Member for San Fernando East and the Member for Laventille West in which those matters have not been heard as yet, no date has been fixed.

There have been two election petitions; one against the hon. Member for Ortoire/Mayaro and the other, the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre. Those matters have not been heard. There is a constitutional motion filed in which the allegations by the two hon. Members on this side are to the effect that their rights are being infringed, the arguments are being heard. When that issue is finished, there is a right of appeal by either side to the Court of Appeal. When that issue is finished, there is a right of appeal by either side to the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council.

What happens is that the issue which was raised in the election petition is an issue involving the interpretation of the Constitution, therefore, the question which arises is that we have to accept the fact that if we believe in court and in law, that is the legal process.

Mr. Speaker, I do not understand. Those processes cannot be finished in two weeks, two months, six months or even a year. Where is the point of two weeks and “Prime Minister for the time being”? Is it that there is another agenda? An extra legal agenda? I do not know. Therefore, I think the Opposition should get up and tell us that in relation to what the Member for Diego Martin Central said, that “In two weeks’ time, you all would not be there” and “the Prime Minister is the Prime Minister for the time being”—they should get up and make an explanation in the light of the hon. Prime Minister's statement today.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: We will be in Grenada with you.

Mr. Sudama: They are planning a coup!

Mr. Assam: You are talking about preserving the democracy? Hypocrite! I have it in mind.

Hon. R. L. Maharaj: I have to put on record that this country should be very indebted to the Elections and Boundaries Commission. It is not perfect, like every other institution, and if there are problems in the Elections and Boundaries Commission, it must be the duty of all of us to try to solve those problems. If there is a lack of resources, it must be the duty of the Government to provide those resources, but the Elections and Boundaries Commission, under the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago, is not appointed by the Prime Minister. The Commission is appointed by the head of State after consultation with the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition, and they are totally independent, totally insulated from political interference.

As a matter of fact, in the Representation of the People Act, in section 3 it says:

“In the exercise of its functions under the Constitution, the Commission shall exercise general direction and supervision over the administrative conduct of elections and enforce on the part of all election officers, fairness, impartiality and compliance with this Act.”

If the Elections and Boundaries Commission, under the chairmanship of Sir Isaac Hyatali, has done very good elections over the years and there have been no substantial allegations—even if there were allegations, the Elections and Boundaries Commission has dealt with them.

As a matter of fact, I remember on election night before the results were known, I was looking at a television programme in which the spokesman for the People's National Movement, Mr. John Donaldson, was speaking. He paid tribute, I have the tape, to the Elections and Boundaries Commission. He said this was a fair election, and if it is one thing we can say, this election was fair! He said he wanted to congratulate the Elections and Boundaries Commission for the good work it has done and, in spite of allegations of voter padding, they were very minimal in relation.

He went further, Mr. Speaker, and said that over the years there have been some of these allegations and no election can be perfect. Mr. Speaker, within hours thereafter, when the results came out, it is like two people or a few—when we were young, playing a game of marbles and one of us lost the game and wanted to break up the game.

Here it is that if this time you lose, take your loss, but if it is that you feel strongly that this thing was fraudulent, then put the evidence before the court. There is no evidence before the court now by the PNM, that there was any fraud in any election in Trinidad and Tobago. I have examined all the election petitions which have been filed. I have looked at the law and the law provides that if there is fraud, massive fraud, that the court can intervene. I am saying here, and I want the other side, in the light of all that is said here today and yesterday, to get up and say which court has before it, evidence of fraud. None!

Mr. Boynes: Come it will.

Hon. R. L. Maharaj: As a matter of fact, tell me if it will, under what section. There is a time limit and the time limit is gone. [*Laughter*] They could still apply for an extension of time and see if the judge will give it to them, but when filing it, publish it and let people see.

Mr. Speaker, I do not think that it is right for an Opposition which is aiming to be in Government and which has a duty to the people—not only to their supporters, but to all the people of Trinidad—to come here and say, “We will file, but we do not know what we are going to file” and come and say “Fraud! Election fraud!” That is why the Standing Orders provide that if one wants to allege fraud, corruption or misconduct against people in this Parliament, one has to file a substantive motion and come and say, “Attorney General, you are corrupt. You did this, that and that”, and then the Attorney General will get up and answer. Do not come and make a brush statement and say, “All of you are corrupt and thieves”. With my greatest respect, we are not being fair to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. They can take that! We can take that!

I think that anybody who is in public life has developed a thick skin. People will call one a thief and whatever else, but one has developed a thick skin to it because if one had to respond to everything, one would not stop responding: That is not the point. Are we being fair to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? Are we not being self-centred and more concerned about ourselves, our egos, our own positions, whether we would look bad? Should we not really think about the people?

Mr. Speaker, this is a very good country. This country has a tradition and a reputation throughout the world. A country of diverse races, culture, religion and we have lived in peace. We have had our problems but we are a strong people. Here it is when we can sit here in the Parliament and we can, by our actions, inactions and utterances, send a signal which can ignite a country, then it is what the hon. Member for Naparima is talking about. We would have failed.

I want to appeal to the other side to forget ourselves. We will go. All of us are not here forever. Everyone has their time. People will come and go, but we must leave a legacy that the future people of Trinidad and Tobago will look upon us and say in difficult times, we have done our duty. [*Desk thumping*]

3.25 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, how narrow-minded can we be? The Member for Diego Martin Central got up—I do not want to get into the details of that debate, but we cannot, on the one hand, say that we believe in law and, on the other hand, we stand aside or we encourage the contravention of the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. It does not matter who he or she is; the reason there are constitutions and written constitutions is because it has been recognized that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. It has been recognized that if you do not limit the boundaries of the exercise of public power, those same people can become dictators and can oppress the people.

That is why the history has been that people did not have rights; people had to petition the king and queen to be able to get concessions, and as history developed people fought and lost their lives. You had a situation in which the king and queen used to say that nothing they did was wrong; you could call it the divine right of kings. People fought; you had the Magna Carta, the Bill of Rights and the Glorious Revolution, and it has developed to the point that the power is in the hands of the people. That is the system that we have: the elected people, who are the Members of Parliament, as far as the Opposition is concerned, are accountable to the Parliament and to the people, and the Cabinet is accountable to the people through the Parliament.

Therefore, when an elected Member—whether he is the Minister of Works and Transport, the Minister of Health, or the Attorney General—does something wrong, if he oppresses people, he can come here in the well of public opinion and will have to defend himself. Where you have a constitution in which you put into the hands of a head of State certain boundaries of power, and where you see, nakedly and flagrantly as he admitted, that a request to appoint Government Senators is not in accordance with the Constitution, you cannot, on the one hand say, "You are right, but I am not supporting you, because if it is two, it is right, but if it is seven, it is wrong."

Mr. Speaker, I am going to make a statement today in this Parliament: the actions of the Opposition in this matter, would be a matter in which the Opposition would have to pay at the public opinion for its responsibility in aiding and abetting the contravention of the Constitution, and they would pay dearly. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Assam: They would pay dearly!

Hon. R. L. Maharaj: I do not want to be long; I just have a few more things to say. I am so happy that we have new Members of Parliament on both sides. I would like to congratulate all the new Members of Parliament. Speaking for myself, I see hope on the other side; I see a lot of hope.

I see that the hon. Member for Arima and the hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West would give a lot of hope to the PNM and to the nation of Trinidad and Tobago. They bring to this Parliament, not their personal aims and ambitions, but the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I have followed their careers, and I know that two of the greatest assets that this country can have are those two honourable persons sitting on the other side. [*Desk thumping*] I feel that no matter what has happened in the last day or two, there is a beacon of hope, there is a light shining, that the PNM would, obviously, come out of the darkness which has clouded them over the last few years.

I say that with no disrespect to the hon. Member for San Fernando East. I mean no disrespect to him; he is my friend. He is my Member of Parliament, as a matter of fact. He is my friend, and I mean no disrespect to him. I say that in the hope that he would look at them. He would look at their lives; he would see how they act, how they think of Trinidad and Tobago so that they can help mould his vision for Trinidad and Tobago.

We cannot, on the one hand, talk about the dress of the hon. Minister of Finance, quote the Standing Orders, rules and regulations. If we want to adhere to the Standing Orders, we have to adhere to all, because the Standing Orders say that you must not come here and call people "tief" and liar; you must not raise these things without a substantive motion. You cannot come now and say, "The shirt that the hon. Minister of Finance is wearing is wrong."

Mr. Speaker, I must say that I felt sorry for my friend, the hon. Member for San Fernando East. When he got up to speak yesterday, I thought it was a matter of great moment. I looked forward to a statement in which he would say that having told the country he would walk if he lost, why he was not walking. [*Laughter*] I thought that this honourable Parliament would have benefited from the experiences he had while walking during the election campaign. I looked and I wondered; I looked and I wondered, and I saw and heard that all he could speak about was whether it should have been a shirt jack suit or that kind of outfit.

I thought that he would then say how it was not a shirt jack suit, because under the rules a Member of Parliament can wear a shirt jack suit. Is he saying that a shirt jack suit must have the same colour shirt and the same colour pants? Where is it? Is he saying that his shirt jack suit must be made of this kind of

material and not light material? Where is it? I thought that he would have also helped the Parliament and say that in the days of his friend, Mr. Raffique Shah, he wore a short-sleeved shirt jack suit. He did not get up and object to Mr. Shah. I want to know, and he must tell this Parliament why he did not object to Mr. Shah, but he objected to the hon. Minister of Finance. Why is it? [*Crosstalk*] [*Laughter*]

Mr. Assam: He has always been a wicked fellow. I do not know how the Members Arima and Port of Spain North could have been associated with this wickedness, but they thought he would have walked. [*Laughter*] [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. R. L. Maharaj: There was also a severe attack on the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP). Everybody got attacked in this debate, even you, Mr. Speaker. Some started not calling you “Mr. Speaker”, and then they came around to it. Then afterwards I was happy to hear the hon. Member for Diego Martin Central say that you are a fair Speaker. I knew that it was only a matter of time for God to enlighten them that you are a fair Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] I know and I have confidence that God would enlighten them, that all the wrongs they have committed here in the last two days, their conscience would trouble them and they would come back and by their actions would show that they are sorry for what they have done.

Mr. Speaker, I think that I should put it on record. The Director of Public Prosecutions should not be attacked in the way he was. As a matter of fact, the DPP is an independent office under the Constitution, and one sees that he is doing his job objectively, honestly and to the best of his ability. I think that if you want to query that, then the law provides that you can even judicially review and file constitutional motions and take whatever point before the court.

I do not think it is fair to attack a public servant, Mr. Cayenne; to come here and use the parliamentary privilege and attack Mr. Cayenne. If you have problems with Mr. Cayenne, you can file a motion. You can put his conduct on a motion, and, obviously, instructions would be given so his side of the story would be able to be told.

Mr. Speaker, I would ask us in this House: we have our agendas, but whatever agendas we have, let us look at the nation as a whole. The nation connotes that feeling of community-mindedness; we have a common belonging to each other. We must progress as a nation, and we can only progress as a nation if we really regard all of us as brothers and sisters. We will have differences, but do not allow those differences to undermine the purpose for which we are here.

Thank you.

The Minister of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Gerald Yetming): Mr. Speaker, after listening to the Attorney General, I was tempted to just simply say, “I beg to move,” but I will begin my reply at the point at which the opposite side started the debate, and that was with my attire.

When the Member for Diego Martin East got up, he made reference to my attire, and he said it in one sentence. I thought that the point had been made, and I suspected that the Speaker would have made some note to deal with the matter at some later point in time. I was rather surprised to see the Member for San Fernando East get up and take five minutes, thereabouts, to deal with the only issue that he could speak about, and that is my attire.

I would draw reference to the contribution of the Member for Diego Martin West. I listened to him carefully; he was giving advice appropriate to the debate. Notwithstanding the fact that he was reading from a document from a bank, he was giving advice that was appropriate to the debate, and I listened to him very carefully. I compared that contribution to the contribution from the Member for San Fernando East, and I wondered what the Member for Arima and the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West would have to say about that, and, really, who should be leader of the opposite side. [*Desk thumping*]

The Member for San Fernando East came here and made reference to the fact that I would not wear this outfit in the bank, but I will come here with it; suggesting that I came here to disrespect the House. I will make the statement, Mr. Speaker, that I will not knowingly, by word, deed, action or wear, disrespect this honourable House. [*Desk thumping*] For the Member for San Fernando East to suggest that I would wear a jacket and tie in the bank and come here to wear this, is malicious! Malicious!

Mr. Manning: Strong!

Mr. Assam: It is not strong enough!

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: For the past four years I have been wearing outfits like these. I have been wearing them in the boardrooms of the bank, not only in Trinidad and Tobago, but also throughout the Caribbean.

Four years ago, when I decided that a jacket and tie were inappropriate for this part of the world and I was sick and tired of walking with a jacket on my hand throughout airports and wherever, and simply walking into a room to put on a jacket, I thought it was also hypocrisy. I went to Radical Designs, a woman by the name of Dianne Hunte, foremost Caribbean designer in Trinidad and Tobago, and I asked her, “Please design for me a business wear to replace the jacket and tie.” She designed for me an outfit made of linen, which I wore for two years.

When I needed a replacement, I went to another foremost designer in Trinidad and Tobago, Meiling, and I said to her, “Would you please design me a business wear, not elegantly casual; business wear that I could use in the board rooms and State houses throughout the Caribbean, in place of a jacket and tie,” and this is what she designed for me. [*Desk thumping*] This is not elegantly casual. You can call it what you will. This, in my view, is Caribbean business wear. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Go to Meiling and ask her to design wear for Parliament.

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: Mr. Speaker, Meiling and Radical Designs are foremost Caribbean designers based in Trinidad and Tobago trying to reach the fashion capitals of the world for Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: “Dey just doh make jacket and tie!”

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: Trying to reach the fashion capitals of the world for Trinidad and Tobago; trying to create an industry for the creative people of Trinidad and Tobago; trying to create an industry for the seamstresses, cutters and so on, that they could develop for Trinidad and Tobago, and we want to discourage them! We want to discourage them!

Mr. Speaker, my own view is that the jacket and tie is inappropriate for this climate. [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar: He said it is his view! He said, “My own view!”

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: I would also say that for the past four years I have been wearing these outfits, I have paid courtesy calls on Presidents: the President of Suriname. I have paid courtesy calls on Prime Ministers: St. Vincent, St. Lucia. I have paid courtesy calls on ministers of finance, all wearing my Caribbean Trinidad design business wear. I have received compliments from both men and women on my appropriate business wear. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Speaker, the regulations governing dress says that the Standing Orders are silent. I read this thing before I came here. I did not come in here walking into this honoured place just so; I read the book that the people sent me. The Standing Orders are silent!

“While the standard of dress in the chamber is a matter for the individual judgment of the Member.”

The standard of dress is a matter for the individual judgment of the Member. I am not a lawyer, but I know what this means.

3.40 p.m.

Mr. Speaker, it says at the end of the day the ultimate discretion rests with the Speaker. It goes on to say: "The practice of the House is that Members must wear a jacket, shirt and tie or shirt jack suit." Who establishes the practice?

Hon. Member: The Speaker.

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: So I am appealing to the Speaker, not to the Member for San Fernando East who had absolutely nothing to say about the debate. I am not appealing to him, I am appealing to you, Mr. Speaker, because you have the right, because the practice in the House is that Members wear a jacket, shirt and tie. I see some Members who are not wearing a tie and nobody is questioning that. Some Members are wearing—

Mr. Assam: Eddie Hart and Fitzgerald Hinds wear pajamas in this House already. *[Laughter]*

Mr. Speaker: Order please! Order!

Mr. Joseph: You are making fun of our national wear?

Mr. Speaker: Please continue.

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: Mr. Speaker, I am sure that some time ago shirt jack suit or otherwise never appeared in here. I am sure that was so. Somewhere along the line, somebody in their wisdom thought that in the light of changing fashion, in the light of recognition of climate, or whatever it is, that maybe it was appropriate for a shirt jack to be put in here. On the basis of advice that I have from the two leading designers who tell me that I am wearing their design for Caribbean business wear which they hope to promote throughout the region, I am simply asking, Mr. Speaker, for your guidance as to whether what I am wearing is appropriate, and whatever you decide I will abide by. *[Desk thumping]* I have Hugo Boss in my cupboard, you know.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Diego Martin West made reference to certain points that came out of a bank publication that dealt with the economy, or caution on lending or borrowing or whatever. I just want to say that the economy, as I know it as of now, is in extremely good shape. *[Desk thumping]* As far as I am concerned, the exchange rate on which the Member for Diego Martin East spent a lot of time is competitive and stable. Economic growth has been extremely good, inflation has been on the low, single digit and consistent, and unemployment has been reducing. I think the Member for Siparia made reference to that in her contribution and our international reserves are extremely strong.

Mr. Speaker, we will not allow the gains of the past five years to be lost and this Minister of Finance understands his responsibilities. The Member for Diego Martin West also made reference to the fact that last year there was an oil windfall of over \$3.9 billion and I want to correct for the record, that statement, because the impression might have been given that there was some surplus \$3.9 billion that came into the coffers of the Government. There was no surplus of \$3.9 billion. The fact of the matter is—whether you want to accept it or you do not—that this Government took surplus revenues of \$415 million and put it into an oil stabilization fund. What this Government has done is put \$415 million of excess revenues that it receives on its oil receipts into a stabilization fund and will bring a bill before this House very shortly to ensure that that fund as it stands at the moment, and as it should grow, will be properly managed whether under this administration or any other administration, [*Desk thumping*] because the controls on the use of that fund will be carefully managed to ensure that the moneys are going to be used only in proper, prescribed conditions.

Mr. Speaker, I make reference to the Member for Diego Martin East who made reference to the fact that I came here with a clean slate and he is watching me. I will say to him and to all on the other side I came with a clean slate and I am going to leave with a clean slate. [*Desk thumping*] Reference was being made to the former Minister of Finance, the “fella” cannot defend himself, all kinds of attacks were made on him. They made reference to the fact of who he was hugging up in fete and how many cigars he was smoking and I really do not know what is the relevance of that. We are debating a Finance Bill, what does it have to do with a former Minister of Finance liking to smoke cigars? I will make a point, if only for the record, I will make a point because I know that hon. Members on the other side are waiting to throw sticks and stones at me and I say that I have very simple taste. I do not smoke cigars, except occasionally; I do not drink champagne, except for toasting; I do not drink scotch, red, blue or black; I drink rum. Very simple taste.

Mr. R. L. Maharaj: Do not tell them what you do.

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: I will account to the Integrity Commission as anybody else in here will be expected to do. I will only make one admission, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. R. L. Maharaj: Do not make it, do not make it.

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: I have a little benefit that I qualify for in this House which everybody else qualifies for, which is a vehicle and you get certain tax benefits and so on that I will use to the maximum, Mr. Speaker, and when I take delivery three months from now, I will not have to account as the Member for Oropouche was forced to do.

Mr. Manning: The “Minister of pumpkin and bhaji”.

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: Mr. Speaker, as a newcomer to this House, I was extremely troubled by the fire, the venom and the acidity coming from certain Members on the other side. I have friends on the other side, but I was very concerned about the fire and venom coming from some of them. I am not too sure that that fire and venom will not be destructive, if not to themselves because it is not healthy, in my view, in this House where we come to do serious business and in fact, I am really endorsing what the hon. Attorney General said a few minutes ago. *[Interruption]* I have now come, but I have come to serve the people of Trinidad and Tobago and I will do so to the best of my ability and I do not have to come here to deal with that fire and venom. We are human beings, hopefully with one interest in mind and the one interest is that of all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. *[Desk thumping]*

Mr. Speaker, I commend the public servants who helped put these documents together for this novice Minister. *[Desk thumping]* I think they did an excellent job in the kind of time-frame that was allotted to them. There was one omission which had to do with the point about who is the landlord of the building on Sackville Street that the Member for Laventille East/Morvant spent 10 minutes arguing about. It was a simple omission, and the Minister of Education did provide the information. There is an omission for which I take full responsibility and I want to put that on record.

Mr. Speaker, I am going to stray a bit from the purpose of this Motion because of the speakers on the other side. Most of them dealt with the voter padding matter and I want to touch on it very briefly because I was a part of the campaign of the United National Congress. When this matter of voter padding raised its head sometime before the election was launched, I wanted to be satisfied that I was not in the midst of anything that was not correct. I am not a trained investigator, I do not have the resources of the police at my command, but I know sufficient to know when something is right or wrong. If I am in a building and it is shaking I do not have to be an engineer to know that something is wrong and I should move.

I did my own discreet inquiries; at the same time I was waiting to see whether the police would come up with something because they had forces on the road trying to deal with the matter. I was hoping that the Elections and Boundaries Commission which had all the information before them would say something, but I did my own thing and I would say, unequivocally, that there was no conspiracy, no plan on behalf of the United National Congress to vote pad anything. [*Desk thumping*] I consider myself an independent person because from where I came, integrity was the most important thing that we had and I have come in here with it and I will leave with it.

Mr. Speaker, I want to touch on some numbers because this voter padding would suggest that you take from one area and put in another area. In 1995, the PNM got 256,000 votes; in the year 2000, the PNM got 276,000 votes, an increase of 20,000 votes. In 1995, the UNC got 240,000 votes and in the year 2000 they got 307,000, an increase of 67,000 votes. The UNC increased its voters by 67,000 over the years 1995—2000 and the PNM increased its by 20,000. What they are failing to realize and accept is that the population is moving away from that party with its poor leadership and is coming to where it believes it could be accepted in an inclusive party.

If you are going to pad, and if there was padding, could we have received 67,000 more votes? Because if you are padding, you are moving from one to the other, your net increase should not have been 67,000 and I would go further to say that in Diego Martin West, 1995—2000, the UNC increased its votes by 2,400; in Diego Martin Central, 1995—2000 the UNC increased by 1,400; in Diego Martin East, 1995—2000, there was an increase of 2,300; San Fernando East, increased by 2,000 votes, 1995—2000. I want to know whether the opposite side is suggesting that there was voter padding from Diego Martin West down to San Fernando East and whether there was voter padding to increase the total number of votes by 67,000 versus their 20,000 and if they would analyze these numbers carefully, they would not be attempting to go on the road to raise a lot of unnecessary strife on the population, but they would examine their own leadership and their own policies to correct their own deficiencies, and I want the Members for Arima and Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West to recognize that.

3.55 p.m.

Mr. B. Panday: Really, they have recognized it but they cannot say anything—

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: Mr. Speaker, I am not here—

Mr. B. Panday:—until the right times comes.

Sen. The Hon. G. Yetming: Mr. Speaker, I am not here for *mauvais langue*. I am not here for “ole” talk; I came here to do the business of the people of Trinidad and Tobago which I shall do to the best of my ability.

I beg to move.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved

That this House adopt the First Report (2001 Session) of the Finance Committee of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on proposals for the Expenditure from the Public Revenue which were not included in the Annual Estimates, 1999/2000.

FINANCE (VARIATION OF APPROPRIATION) (1999/2000) BILL

Order for second reading read.

The Minister of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Gerald Yetming): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move,

That the Bill to vary the appropriation of the sum of the issue of which was authorized by the Appropriation Act, 1999/2000, be now read a second time.

Question proposed.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Question put and agreed to, That the Bill be read the third time.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs (Hon. Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj): Mr. Speaker, I beg to move that the House do now stand adjourned to Friday, February 2, 2001 at 1.30 p.m.

That day will be Private Members’ Day, because Private Members’ Day would have been on January 26, 2001 and since we are not sitting on that day, it is our duty to give February 2, 2001 as Private Members’ Day. If the Opposition does not want to use that day, they can indicate to us now and we would use it for Government Business.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Speaker, I wish to indicate to the hon. Leader of Government Business that we most certainly would be using that day.

Finance Committee Report

Tuesday, January 23, 2001

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 4.00 p.m.