

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**OLD AGE PENSIONS (AMDT. AND VALIDATION) BILL**

Bill to amend the Old Age Pensions Act, Chap. 32:02 and to validate certain things done thereunder, brought from the Senate [*The Minister of Social Development*]; read the first time.

*Motion made*, That the next stage of the Bill be taken at a later stage of the proceedings. [*Hon. M. Abdul-Hamid*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

**PUBLIC ASSISTANCE (AMDT. AND VALIDATION) BILL**

Bill to amend the Public Assistance Act, Chap. 32:03 and to validate certain things done thereunder, brought from the Senate [*The Minister of Social Development*]; read the first time.

*Motion made*, That the next stage of the Bill be taken at a later stage of the proceedings. [*Hon. M. Abdul-Hamid*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

**ORAL ANSWER TO QUESTION**

**National Commission for Self Help  
(Details of Expenditure)**

**14. Mr. Manohar Ramsaran** (*Chaguanas*) asked the hon. Minister of Community Development and Gender Affairs:

- (a) Could the Minister tell this House the amount of money that was given by SWMCOL to the National Commission for Self Help to implement projects? Could the Minister indicate who is responsible for the expenditure of that sum?
- (b) Could the Minister state the projects that have been implemented and advise whether these have been completed?

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, just to bring to your attention, Question No. 13 was not answered and I am not seeing it on the Order Paper.

**Mr. Valley:** It was deferred for one week.

**The Minister in the Ministry of Community Development and Gender Affairs (Hon. Eulalie James):** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to provide for the general information of hon. Members of the House of Representatives the following response to Question No. 14.

Cabinet gave approval to the Solid Waste Management Company Limited (SWMCOL) to source a loan in the sum of \$15 million to finance the cost of works under the short term National Social Development Programme (NSDP). The Minister of Community Development and Gender Affairs, in collaboration with the Minister of Public Utilities and the Environment, established an Implementation Unit comprising of SWMCOL, the National Commission for Self-Help Limited (NCSHL), the Community Development Division of the Ministry of Community Development and Gender Affairs and the Community Development Fund. The Unit brought together expertise in project identification, implementation and management for the purpose of executing the programme. Project proposals were submitted by the Community Development Division, the National Commission for Self Help Limited, the Community Development Fund and other related Organizations. No funding was released to the National Commission for Self Help. Payments were made directly to the contractors and suppliers after verification, on a project-by-project basis.

The Cabinet Note placed responsibility for the implementation of the entire NSDP with the Water and Sewerage Authority, the Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission and the Solid Waste Management Company Limited.

To date, 27 projects have been completed; 56 are in progress and one has been abandoned. The 83 projects initiated are categorized as follows:

Community Centres	-	25
Places of Worship	-	11
Recreational and Cultural Facilities	-	10
Transformational Development Centres	-	8
Training and Educational Facilities	-	5
Emergency Relief to Buildings	-	8
Minor Repairs to Roads	-	6
Other Infrastructural Work	-	10

**OLD AGE PENSIONS (AMDT. AND VALIDATION) BILL**

**The Minister of Social Development (Sen. The Hon. Mustapha Abdul-Hamid):** [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move,

That a Bill to amend the Old Age Pensions Act, Chap. 32:02 and to validate certain things done thereunder, be now read a second time.

In moving the second reading of this Bill, I seek the leave of the House to discuss along with this Bill, the Public Assistance (Amdt.) Bill, 2002 since they are interrelated.

*Question put and agreed to.*

**Sen. The Hon. M. Abdul-Hamid:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Bill is simply straightforward, in that it intends to validate certain actions and undertake amendments to actions of the Government in the past. It is complicated only by the fact that we have validation amendments to undertake at this stage for actions taken by the last administration and these amendments and validation date back as far as 2000.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, clause 2 of the Bill seeks to amend section 3 of the Old Age Pensions Act, Chap. 32:02. Clause 2(a) would amend section 3(1) of the Act to increase the income ceiling from \$720 to \$1,000 with effect from January 01, 2003. It should be noted that in 1999, a two-band system was introduced allowing for a basic pension which applied to persons who would earn in excess of \$100 and at the time, \$520, and what we are doing at this stage is expanding the ceiling to cater for persons who earn between \$100 and now expanding the income ceiling to \$1,000.

What that means, therefore, is that persons who in the past would have been earning in excess of \$720, would not have been eligible for this basic pension. With this Bill, with effect from January 01, 2003, this administration is expanding and opening the gates, as it were, so that more persons become eligible and qualify for this basic pension. It is an act that would affect many of our elderly persons; it is an action that would affect, in a positive way, some of our elderly citizens, in that more persons would become eligible for the basic pension. That is the effect of this particular amendment.

Clause 2(b) of the Bill would amend section 3(1)(b) of the Act which deals with the monthly pension. I should note that the monthly pension is the pension payable to persons who are in receipt of a monthly income, which is less than \$100 per month. This amendment would reflect the increase in the monthly pension from \$720 to \$800, which was from October 01, 2001 to December 31, 2001.

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[SEN. THE HON. M. ABDUL HAMID]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

Clause 2(b)(ii) would increase the monthly pension from \$800 to \$1,000 with effect from January 01, 2002. The basic pension payments have been increased since 2000, however, the legislation was not amended to reflect these increases. Clause 2(c) seeks to address this situation and would amend the basic pension as follows—and I remind Members that the basic pension is for those who are eligible on the basis of income in excess of \$100: From \$520 to \$620; that increase took effect from October 01, 2000 to September 30, 2001; from \$620 to \$700 with effect from October 01, 2001 to December, 31, 2001; from \$700 to \$900 with effect from January 01, 2002.

I would now deal with clause 3 of the Bill which addresses the issue of validation. We are all aware of the events following the December 2001 general election. In the absence of parliamentary approval for the payment of increased amounts of monthly and basic pensions, this validation is required. I would now go through the clauses: Clause 3(1) and (2) seek to validate the increase in the monthly pension to \$800 from October 01, 2001 and a further increase to \$1,000 from January 01, 2002.

The payment of the increased amounts of the basic pension also requires validation. Clause 3(3) seeks to validate the following increases in the basic pension:

- the increase from \$520 to \$620 from October 01, 2000 to September 30, 2001;
- the increase from \$620 to \$700 from October 01, 2001 to December 31, 2001;
- the increase from \$700 to \$900 from January 01, 2002.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I pointed out, the figures may seem a bit cumbersome but they are only complicated by the fact that we have had to perform the duties which normally would have been performed by the last administration if only they had the political will at the time. [*Crosstalk*]

During 1991—1995 a national population policy was formulated and in particular, it addressed the needs of the elderly. A presentation was made in Cairo, Egypt on behalf of this Government at a United Nations conference. I make reference to this particular population policy simply to point out the depth and the length of time that this particular party in Government has been contemplating issues relevant to the elderly, and the length of time that we have invested in ensuring that we get the policy right, and we get our programmes and projects

with regard to the elderly. We have indeed invested a significant amount of time, energy and effort to make sure that we get our actions right.

We were able to determine as a consequence of that national population policy that as a result of improvements in medical treatment and medical technology and so on, that the size of our elderly population was growing rapidly, and so it came as no surprise to us that the figures of 2000 estimate that there are 120,400 elderly persons in our society, which is an increase of over 70,000 from the year 1960. As a result of that, we have recognized that there are special needs of the elderly and we, as a Government, have to ensure that we have the requisite institutional infrastructure to manage the services to our elderly.

As a result, the Ministry of Social Development has been in the process of devising a national policy on aging. This national policy on aging is intended to address a number of issues relating to aging and to the elderly. These include meaningful participation and involvement of the elderly in society; adequate community-based services; respect for the elderly; education and public awareness on issues related to aging and the elderly; access to affordable health care; housing; recreation and encouraging and support for on-going research on aging issues.

The word “research” here is very important because it is on the basis of scientific and proper research that we intend to design our policy, and it is as a result, too, of proper consultation that we hope that we are going to, in fact, be able to design the best calibrated policies. And this consultation—consultation being a characteristic of our Government—has started on October 01, 2002.

We launched a series of consultations and conducted the first consultation in Port of Spain for stakeholders in Port of Spain. On November 28, 2002 we conducted a consultation at the Naparima Bowl for stakeholders in south and central. That consultation I attended myself and I am happy to say that particular consultation was quite fruitful and beneficial. The information we got from that particular consultation would go a long way towards helping us understand the needs of the elderly.

In fact, we intend to continue this process of consultation because we have scheduled a consultation, later this month, for stakeholders in east Trinidad and in February we intend to have our final regional consultation for stakeholders in Tobago. I should also point out, as a result of these consultations, we intend to establish a Division of Aging. This Division of Aging—and Cabinet has, in fact, already approved the establishment of a Division of Aging—is to be housed in the

Ministry of Social Development. This division would be responsible for coordinating and monitoring the implementation of the national policy on aging; monitoring the implementation of the international plan of action on aging; developing and implementing programmes and projects for the elderly and conducting research on issues relating to aging and the elderly. This Division of Aging is a specialized institution dedicated to the needs and to providing services to our elderly because, as I have said before, we recognize that those needs are special, as we recognize that our elderly play very significant roles in our society.

We are aware of the social role that they play in keeping families together, in handing down traditions and culture, in handing down good moral values, in maintaining the integrity of the family and in maintaining integrity in families. As a result of that, we must recognize the talents and abilities of our elderly and their usefulness to society. In particular I want to make mention of our grandmothers, because we know very well that in many homes where parents are sometimes deficient, you find grandparents having to play the role of grandparent and parent. Those are very important, significant and valuable roles that are played. In fact, that role is not only confined to the social, the cultural and the moral, but they find themselves often having to play the role of economic provider.

In our Government, we have recognized the pivotal role that grandparents play and we continue to provide as much assistance as we can. That assistance is not confined only to the old age pension, because we must recognize that we have instituted a number of other programmes which are very useful to our elderly in ensuring that they are able to perform all their roles. You would be aware of our Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme which has, in fact, been of great use, not only to our elderly, but to our young, in that all the values that are present in the minds and the character of our elderly, they are in a position, as a result of this programme, to share those values with our younger citizens, and our younger citizens, too, are able to share some of their energy and zest for life with our elderly citizens. That combination is something that we are confident has had and will continue to have, a positive general impact on the quality of society that we are able to produce.

We are also addressing the needs of increasing the accessibility to medications by forming partnerships with the private pharmacies from which the elderly may purchase. Those are just two programmes. Our national policy on aging is something to which I must refer again because much good is going to come as a result of those consultations and we are going to be in a position to provide far more comprehensive details about our proposals regarding the elderly, because the process of consultation would, indeed, yield those benefits.

I would also want to make mention of the Public Assistance Bill. The amendment to this Act is straightforward, in that it intends to change the definition of the term “Minister” and it also intends to adjust the income from \$520 to \$600. There was one particular amendment which was made in the other place yesterday to which I must refer, which is contained in a document which has been circulated. It refers to the amendment of the date in the first column, clause 1, where we have to delete “2002” and substitute “2003”.

As I have said, this Bill is a straightforward and simple one and I have attempted to outline the salient features. I now beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question proposed.*

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Members would recall that leave was given to debate this Bill and the Public Assistance (Amdt.) Bill together. Although the question cannot be put together, hon. Members are free to comment on both Bills at the same time.

**Mr. Manohar Ramsaran** (*Chaguanas*): Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is really with a sense of nostalgia that I join this debate on the Bill before us to amend the Old Age Pensions Act and to validate certain things done thereunder. Now, of course, we are also dealing with the amendment to the Public Assistance Act.

I am a bit confused because recently I heard that the ministry dealing with social welfare was the Prime Minister’s office. Maybe it could be cleared up afterwards. When I looked at the responsibility for the Minister of Social Development in the newspapers I did not see social welfare under his purview.

Let me congratulate the Minister for coming here with his maiden speech, but just to let him know that when he comes to this honourable House as a guest of ours, we do not expect him to insult the Members of this honourable House. This is just a warning.

When we hear about policy on aging and what has been said by the hon. Minister, I am still waiting to hear in these Chambers and elsewhere, what new has taken place under this administration. As a matter of fact, if I go through the *Hansard* record, even in 1999, the very said speech that I said there in moving the amendments, included almost everything that was said here this afternoon. So when we come to this House, we try to impress upon people what has happened. When we talk about political will and so on, I remember saying in this Chamber that when we increase old age pension, it is not just to be politically good. It must be placed on record that the UNC administration, of course, led by our distinguished Member for Couva North, increased old age pension four or five

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMSARAN]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

times in our first term. [*Desk thumping*] When I look back at the history of old age pension in this country that was with us since 1954, what I notice over time, with a few exceptions here and there, is that every time there was a little pittance added to the old age pension, you could bet your dollar that was election year.

Even the last \$200 added to our senior citizens' coffers, was done in an election year. People boast in this country about what they did for senior citizens. I want to put on record again—maybe I did it before—between 1991—1995 the PNM Government at that time increased old age pension by the huge total of \$41.15 in five years. The largest increase was \$32 in 1992. Just to put the record straight, when the UNC came into office—this is exactly what I am trying to tell the country. Everything they do is to win an election; not to care about the people of this country. We did that.

As a matter of fact, when we were discussing the increase in pension and I went to my Cabinet, I justified the increase not by saying we were going to win votes here and there; we were keeping in line with the United Nations poverty line. That poverty line was \$620 at that time. I asked my Cabinet then to let us at least bring the 61,000 persons over 65 years who are now receiving pension, out of the poverty trap. That was what was responsible for Trinidad and Tobago placing first in our attempts at fighting poverty, when we think about the poorer people like this.

What are we seeing today in fighting poverty? You talk about increasing pension and satisfying the needs of people, but I want to deal with figures before I answer some of the allegations that were made by the Minister. The total increase by the UNC in our five years in office was \$444. So add that to \$356 when we demitted office in unusual circumstances, we increased our old age pension by more than 124 per cent. With the \$200 that was promised by the UNC and their \$41, we exceeded them by over \$200. [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Members, allow the Member to make his contribution.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** Again, we must put on record that when you do things for our people, you must not only look at it in a political jargon, you have to look at how we deal with our people. When we talk about policy on aging, as Minister of Social Development I came to this House and discussed the issue of aging. What we attempted to do with that division was to ensure that everybody—remember we age not only from 60 but from the date of birth. So when we talk about this division of aging, it includes all the problems that would occur as we move from one year to another, and how we deal with that.



This is a comprehensive policy on aging that was already laid in the Cabinet and elsewhere as to where we move this country forward to deal, not politically with our senior citizens but, indeed, in making them live very comfortably. I would say to the Minister, yes, continue that programme, because we really need to take care of our senior citizens. It hurts me from time to time to see “Grandmother Chopped to Death”, “Pensioner Murdered”. That is what is happening in this country today. We have no care for life or limb. I want to make a special appeal to those opposite not to just politicize everything but to really deal with our senior citizens.

When we were in Government we introduced a bill to deal with senior citizens’ homes; how these homes must be set up; what precautions must be taken; how to monitor these homes. I ask the Minister to continue in this term, if, indeed, he is the Minister responsible for social welfare and senior citizens, to deal with our senior citizens’ homes to ensure that the care that we have put in place would continue to be effective. I am hearing very loudly, a lot of rumblings taking place once more in these homes. We have to investigate them to ensure that they are not allowed to go—as what happened prior to 1995. When we talk about our holistic effort to deal with aging, I think that is why I started my contribution by saying it is rather nostalgic for me this afternoon.

Another area we have to look at is where do we start? How do we describe them? The Member for Laventille East/Morvant, in another dispensation when he was on this side of the House—I want to quote him and then I would go on to talk about what we did when we were campaigning and we promised to increase pensions to persons 60 years and over. I am now quoting the Member for Laventille East/Morvant—unfortunately I cannot say, Minister:

“..there is another difficulty which one wishes to identify when we talk about the business of public assistance. There is a large and growing army of persons between the ages of 60—65 in this country who cannot find sustenance among us. Many of them at that age would have had children who have by now grown and matured, gone abroad to make a way in this world. Some remain at home, of course, and now have their own families and this growing army of elderly persons in our community, are now left, yet again, on their own.

Typically, the husband, the male in the home would have perhaps been an artisan, a skilled man, and at age 60 or thereabouts, again because of the concept and the observance of age discrimination which we must recognize—it exists in the society—nobody wants to employ him. As far as they are concerned, at age 60 he is an old man.”

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMSARAN]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

This is the voice of the Member for Laventille East/Morvant:

“His wife perhaps, and typically, may have been a housewife who was never accustomed to going out there to earn a livelihood; she relied on his income for their survival. Now, with the situation being as the Prime Minister described it with things getting bad...”

Well, now things are getting worse:

“...and unemployment beginning to lift its head going north, yet again, such an individual cannot find work because of his age and the given economic circumstances which Trinidad and Tobago is in today. His wife who was dependent on him all her life, is now at home, the children are gone, and those two people are left in an apartment or in their home some place to suffer. And that is a growing section of the community.”

I continue to quote:

“...even with the Unemployment Relief Programme, which is another social programme in a sense, persons who attain age 60 years are no longer given employment under that programme, not even that. And they are not yet qualified by way of age for old age pension, so between the ages of 60 and 65, it is trouble, tough times, hard times.”

He continues:

“I would like, on behalf of the many persons who have spoken to me on this matter, to place on record our concern about this and hope that this Government would—if it insists that things are not bad, it means therefore, things are good—be able to ameliorate the circumstances as I have just described them with respect to that very important group in the society—persons who have paid their dues and contributed to the building of our community. I think they need some attention.”

The UNC took many things into consideration, and I want to say that as the minister who had the responsibility for social development, when people come to me from time to time to complain, I have to really empathize and sympathize with them when they tell me “at age 60 I am too old to work with the URP; I am too old to be employed by anybody and yet I am too young to receive old age pension.”

I remember going on a retreat with the United National Congress and the recommendation was made that people 60 years and over—and to agree with the Member for Laventille East/Morvant—be paid a pension. As a matter of fact, it was in our manifesto. Let me read it:

“The UNC doubled old age pensions and is responsible for the present \$1000 pension. Under a UNC government this benefit will begin five years earlier at age 60.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am calling on this Government to again look at this question. Maybe when the Member for Laventille East/Morvant talks nobody listens to him, as used to happen, but within the Government now, I think that he should continue to see how he could champion the cause for people between the ages of 60 and 65. I am sure you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as Member of Parliament for a constituency, would have people come to you and talk about this problem. As a matter of fact, I remember you talking to me quietly in another dispensation and another time, of course, about the plight of the people between 60 and 65, especially, as said by the Minister, our grandmothers.

Unfortunately when we age, it is then we have to start thinking of medicine. When you are a teenager, going up to 50 to 55 years, when people talk about medicine you frown upon it, but when you start to reach that age you have to look at what is good for diabetes, for this, for that. This is the time when your income would decrease and your expenditure would increase. I think that when the hon. Prime Minister responded to that increase for pension to persons 60 years and over, it was appalling, really, to talk about money being spent and it would cost the country so much and he cannot afford to pay that pension to persons between 60 and 65. But when you look at the expenditure in the country today, you wonder.

We have something to debate, maybe next week and we would talk more about that expenditure and the waste and squandermania that took place over the last year. But when you talk about our senior citizens between 60 to 65, and you tell the nation, “Do not listen to the UNC, we cannot afford to increase old age pension”, I want to tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that segment of people, whether they voted for the UNC or PNM, it does not matter, but as far as I am concerned, when you look at what is taking place in this country, they deserve that pension at age 60.

I am calling on the Government to look at that carefully so that our people could live a better life in their senior years. The Minister of Health promised us that medicine would be available to our senior citizens. I am still waiting with bated breath, when you could walk into a pharmacy and receive your medication at a special cost, or free, or whatever. That does not happen. I am sure that many would have died since that announcement was made.

I am again calling on the Government, when they make promises, especially to senior citizens, they listen. These senior citizens—and I am sure the Minister

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMSARAN]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

could attest to that—when they come to you they are quite aware of all the problems and all the promises made by ministers. They come to me and say “where is this promise? How would this promise be made? When could I get my medicine?” So consideration should be given to our senior citizens who have attained the age of 60 to receive a pension.

I was not too clear when the Minister mentioned the increase in the ceiling. If what I heard was correct, the ceiling would not be \$1,000 per month. I have in my notes here, it should go to \$1,200 per month because an anomaly could exist if your ceiling is at the size of the pension. There could be some problems. But \$1,000 is welcome for the old age pensioners. At this time we could accept that. But the disability allowance, that ceiling is way too low. We reviewed it and we were coming to this House to have it amended so that every disabled person in this country should be given a disability allowance. We introduced it—they would say that—but when it was done we took into consideration the cost to keep a disabled person alive, especially those who would qualify for a disability grant.

I ask the Government to increase the ceiling, at least to match the \$600. It should be at least \$7,220, and not below that, because it does not make mathematical sense to me nor does it include the people who would need that subvention. Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$3,600 per year or \$300 per month as a ceiling for people who earn more than that, would not be given that disability allowance. I am asking the Minister to amend that today, that it should read, at least the equivalent of the old age pension which is \$1,000 per month. Remember when we left office it was \$8,440. It was equal to the old age pension. I think the same should apply to the people with disabilities.

As we said all over the place on our platforms—elections are over but we are in Parliament today—let us give to every disabled person in this country who qualifies, that disability allowance. Further to that, even the five years over the last 20 years that people live abroad—if you live more than that you would not qualify for disability allowance—I think we should look at that because there are some people who, because of medical reasons, had to go abroad to seek medical care. So I think we should have another look at that and come back to this House, or even today and say “let us remove that age limit to two years”, perhaps. I remember the Member for Arouca North, when we were discussing the amendment to the old age pension a couple years ago, talked about people living abroad and returning and were not given pension and they had valid reasons for travelling. They did not go to work or anything, but needed medical attention, and so on. So I think it is a good time to reduce that five years to two years.

Another recommendation I would like to make is, senior citizens 60 years of age, again, when the UNC was in office, we had reintroduced, or made it more applicable to pensioners to have free bus passes. I think that we should recommend—not in this debate, really—that bus passes be given to people 60 years and over. I remember the Government talking about air transport between Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago, you might well be aware, we have many strong family ties. Now, because of the increase in air fare and the difficulty to travel between Trinidad and Tobago, I would ask the Government of the day—they say they care, but I would not go there this afternoon—let us see if we could assist our senior citizens, especially persons 60 years and over with, if not free air travel, at least free ferry service so that they could visit their families.

I think this recommendation should be taken seriously. It would not cost the Government too much money, but it would give our senior citizens a chance to travel from Trinidad to Tobago, at least on the ferry for the time being so that they could keep in touch with their relatives they have not seen for a long time. People wrote me recently talking about the hardship they experienced to visit their relatives between Trinidad and Tobago.

When we demitted office we had about nine senior citizens' homes in this country and because of what is happening now, I think we should have another look at encouraging NGOs, Government agencies, whoever, to have more of these senior citizens' homes. As I said before, you cannot think about our senior citizens and just say, well, take another \$100 pension increase. I am sure—I am putting on record now—there would be no increase for our senior citizens for the next five years. If it happens I would be the first to thank the Government for doing that; but I am sure it would not happen. In the meantime, we could have senior citizens' homes; we could build some of these homes across Trinidad and Tobago.

I want to tell you, when people come to us today and ask to be referred to a senior citizen home and I call the numbers that we have, they are all filled and the waiting list is long. It is not really conducive to have our senior citizens waiting for a room in an inn, so to speak. I think that we should encourage more of these homes. When we were in office we put all the legislation in place because of the abuse that took place in some of these homes, and I am happy to say that these amendments have tightened the operations of these homes and the time is now ripe to encourage more people to build these homes.

I know they say they do not like to subsidize people, but I think it is time we do that. As I mentioned earlier, you must tie the increase in old age pension with

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMSARAN]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

the poverty trap. When we were in government and we increased pensions, we used to hear the voices from that side talking about, “Oh, only \$100”. What has happened today, with the cost of living going up almost daily—the increase of flour—if the hon. Prime Minister and the Minister—they are both fast asleep.

**Mr. Ramnath:** Aging, aging.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** At least subsidize the cost of flour for the senior citizens. The increase in the cost of flour is 22 per cent. How would this affect our senior citizens? I want you to imagine it; these people who would have to make ends meet; no medicine provided by the Member for Diego Martin East and no health care. Our senior citizens cannot go to the hospital now to be taken care of because of what is happening in the country. But I would not go there. You are quite aware of the negligence shown by the Government in dealing with the sick, and our aging population, especially. They are the fragile section of our community. They are not young and robust as some of us are. I know that when I talk of aging, you smile, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because somebody said you were too old. But I would not go there, too, because I know you are not too old; you are a man in the prime of your life.

The fact is, we have to understand, that money that is being given cannot work in today’s society. That is why I was so anxious to see an increase from \$356 to something that would take our people out of the depths of poverty. Today, with the cost of living increasing, the lack of medical attention and no transport available in many parts of our country since this administration arrived on the scene, I am asking that we, at least, subsidize the price of flour to persons 60 years and over.

I remember the hon. Prime Minister loves food stamps. Maybe he could have some stamping system for senior citizens so when they go to buy flour they pay for it at a subsidized rate. When you listen to what is happening in the country today and you read about it and listen to the radio and look at television, everybody is wondering where will this increase in flour lead us. I heard the hon. Member for San Fernando East say the less bread you eat the more disciplined you become. I cannot understand it. All I know is that the holy men from the East would fast and become disciplined. I do not know if he would like our country to go on a fast. The fact is, I cannot comprehend it. Maybe he could get up and explain—it is only when you talk about vision, he jumps up, but I am not talking about vision now; I am talking about poverty.

When you talk about poverty, I want to read into the record and I want the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West to listen to this letter as written

by Caroni (1975) Limited to a senior citizen who came into my office this week. It is a letter dealing with poverty.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Read the whole thing.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** I will read everything, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The letter heading reads:

“Caroni (1975) Limited, Masters of our Destiny...”

I did not really see that until you asked me to read it.

“PDDTA892

November 20, 2002

Mr. Torrance Ramcharitar

Lamp Post 191

Papourie Road

Diamond Village

San Fernando

Dear Sir,

Sale of a parcel of land situate along an estate trace off Papourie Road,  
Diamond Village, San Fernando.

We refer to our agreement for sale dated September 05, 2000 under caption. As you are aware the following is payable to the company for the sale of a lot of land...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Papourie Road there is no electricity, no water, no road and the price of the land is \$60,000 for one lot. A service charge is \$100 and valuation fee is \$500. The total to be paid by this senior citizen is \$60,600.

“...Our accounts indicate that you have paid to date \$5,000 leaving an outstanding balance of \$55,600. You are required to visit the Property Development Division, Brechin Castle, as early as possible to settle in full the outstanding balance. Upon settlement of this balance a deed would be prepared by the company.

Should you require any additional information please contact...

Signed Russell Boland

Caroni (1975) Limited.”

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMSARAN]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you talk to me all the time about having business acumen and one who understands the world of finance. A senior citizen who would now receive \$1,000 old age pension if he qualifies at all, would have to pay \$60,000 for one lot of land in an area with no electricity and no water. Do we really care about the senior citizens in this country? Do we really understand the plight of our senior citizens?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, could you please tell us the date of that letter? I did not get it.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** I said November 20, 2002.

I think we really need to have another look. I think the Government of the day must understand what is happening. As I was talking about bread, I heard the Member for Arouca South say she is now going to allow flour to be imported. We are confusing our people. On one hand you say this, on the other hand you say the other and our people are very confused. We would like to know the vision of the Government in dealing with our senior citizens because when we look around and see what is happening, we have to be very careful.

We have heard a lot about the Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme. This was introduced under the watch of the former administration before the UNC came into office. When we took office, we kept it. We had programmes across Trinidad and Tobago and one of the reasons we were criticized was because we were not only trying to have the young people employed, but how they deal with the senior citizens. We were trying to find a correct blend. With what is happening today, I ask the Government to continue where we left off. I am not just trying to create employment for some young people and boasting to the nation, but, indeed, think about the senior citizens. I think the balance has shifted where we look at the youth part of the programme. I have nothing against young people but we are discussing the senior citizens today.

I think we should have a system set up to deal with how the elderly people are treated in the Geriatric Adolescent Partnership Programme. I am again calling on the hon. Prime Minister and his Cabinet to look again at that programme. It is a good programme. It had been administered by a former Member of Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago who had that background of dealing with this problem. I am asking them to look at how the people who graduate from that programme could really put what they were taught into practice. If this is put into place, our senior citizens would be well treated.

As we move on, I want to remind the Members on that side—they have short memories; they do not understand what we on this side were attempting to do—



that my colleague and Member for Caroni East when he was the Minister of Public Utilities, introduced a hardship allowance of \$100 to senior citizens who, for some reason, could not afford to pay their entire bill. They would go in there and have \$100 rebate. I know many people across Trinidad and Tobago enjoyed that rebate.

I am calling on the Government to look at this again because I have been told by the senior citizens of this country that no new applications are being attended to and nothing is happening with that project. Furthermore, I would ask for an increase of \$200 rebate. We used to call \$100 nothing, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and now we have this expected oil boom; we have the Government borrowing \$10 billion, or have been asked to borrow \$10 billion. I think a little could be put aside for our senior citizens. You see, when we reach there—and most of us are getting there—it is then we would look back and say, “Well, wait ‘nah’, we really did not cater for our senior citizens.” Old age pension is one step, but when you deal with the problem, you have to look at the entire senior citizen population and how to deal with them.

I want to touch on the Public Assistance (Amdt. And Validation) Bill. I spoke previously about the \$3,600 ceiling, and I humbly ask the Government to consider today that be increased to at least \$7,220 so that it would cover the \$600 disability grant. When this was introduced in Parliament, it was meant to deal with our disabled people in our country. This is a segment of our population which, I am told, is 10 per cent and we must cater for them. When we were in office we asked the Ministry of Works and Transport and other areas concerned with buildings which are built and approved, to have disability-friendly places. I read a newspaper article recently and I have noted that nobody is now listening to these people, to have new buildings equipped with disability-friendly buildings. For example, when we built our stadium, we had different seats for disabled persons. We asked the different contractors at that time to have different ramps, and so on, for disabled persons.

### **2.30 p.m.**

If the Minister looks, he will find a policy to deal with people’s disability. He will find a staff there that deals with disabilities so he can talk to them and encourage them. If the officers that I left are still there, they were committed to the job and the Minister can get them to look at the whole question of people with disability.

It is the same issue as old age pension. They must not come and beat their chests—they cannot do that because they have never increased the disability

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMSARAN]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

allowance. Maybe they had other areas to deal with that they did not increase the disability allowance. I am still waiting for the excuse. Maybe it was not a popular political gimmick; maybe there were not many voters there, but people with disabilities must be treated fairly and with equity.

When this was introduced, both old age pensioners and disability allowance recipients received the same stipend. Today, pension is \$1,000 because, maybe, “61,000 old age pensioners” sounds better than “2,000 recipients of disability allowance”. I do not know, but I am wondering about the disparity. When we increased old age pension to \$800, we moved the disability allowance to \$600. I am almost sure, had we announced \$1,000 for old age pensioners, we would have moved to \$800 for disability allowance recipients.

As we talk about public assistance, there are single mothers—and we have a handbook about domestic violence, which I glimpsed through just last night. We have too many vulnerable people in this country. This morning, I awoke to the news that a headless corpse of a woman was found in Diego Martin. Are these women protected? Are single mothers protected? There is so much talk about it.

A report was laid today in Parliament by the Ministry of Community Development and Gender Affairs on what happened over the last few years. We must empower our single mothers. There was not an increase in public assistance for a long time. Under the UNC it was increased from \$171 to \$222 and then in this year’s budget. I commend the Government for increasing their monetary allowance, but a lot more must be done to deal with our single mothers and with recipients of public assistance whether it is because of disability or any other reason.

When there are so many vulnerable groups in our society—and today there are people being murdered—the whole question of vulnerability is one that should be uppermost in our minds. We should not only give them \$1,000 and forget them. We have to come to Parliament—and I am asking the Member to come quickly—with the Division of Aging policy and all the policies that have been worked upon with all the consultations they have been having, because our country is suffering. These people meet us, politicians, and tell us that.

When we were in office, I remember the Senior Citizens’ Bureau was set up. When dealing with senior citizens, we must deal with them all round. That bureau was set up to deal with persons who might be 60 years old and retired, but could be as strong as the Deputy Speaker. We must use their expertise to do other things, maybe use them as part-time teachers; if they were former sportsmen, to coach our youngsters.

When the Member speaks about political will, we should say that. It was this party, while in Government, which had the political will to put our money where our mouths were and deal with the poor people of our country. [*Crosstalk*] The country's money. The fact is that we must not stop there.

I also heard the Member for San Fernando East accusing the Member for Chaguanas of distributing old age pension and public assistance in a manner—

**Mr. Deputy 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. K. Ramnath*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thank Members for extending my time and propose not to use all.

The hon. Member for San Fernando East said that the Member for Chaguanas distributed public assistance and old age pension willy nilly and one area had more than the other. I do not know where he got his information, but, fortunately, whenever he speaks I am not bothered. I have the record in front of me.

**Mr. Manning:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Chaguanas was quoting me incorrectly. I never said anything about willy nilly. I spoke in relation to the disability grant and the hon. Minister at the time was authorizing cases in his constituency, which, under normal circumstances, would not have been considered disabilities.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, coming from a Prime Minister, that is utter rubbish! If there is any evidence that I did so, let him take me to court and charge me. I never interfered in the day-to-day running of my ministry and for the hon. Prime Minister of this country, a person who, when one talks about child support gets angry—I put it on the record that at no time did this Member, when he was Minister, authorize any payment to anybody in this country. If he has any evidence, he should bring it here and I would defend myself. Had it been the Member for Laventille East/Morvant I would have accepted that, but coming from the hon. Prime Minister, where is this country going? This is an irresponsible statement, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Members, let us keep it calm.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** Let me take the advice of my hon. Leader and forgive him. The next time this hon. Minister comes to this House with that, I will deal with him. [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member for Chaguanas, you were going along well. Do not let this disturb you, please.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** These figures I have in front of me will show that St. George West—let me get the figures in proper order so that I would not be misleading this House, because I would not like to have people believe that what I am saying is not true.

In 1999, for example, which was in the middle of our term, St. George West—3,535 recipients. [*Crosstalk*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are people on that side who are accusing us of wrongdoing. I am going to say it again, if there is any evidence, come forward. We know what is happening, and they talk about corruption. Do you want me to go there, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Do you want me to respond to them or should I continue my debate?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Continue your debate. I was listening very attentively.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** Thank you very much. I knew you would say that. Here we have the hon. Member for Diego Martin Central jumping up and down. We have a health crisis today and I want to put on record that there was a similar situation—not in this proportion at all—when my friend, the Member for Caroni Central, spent nights negotiating with the doctors to end that impasse. I remember calling 4 o'clock in the morning to lend him support. What are we seeing today? This is in dealing with the whole question of what is happening in our country.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** The Hansard reporter is having extreme difficulty to record the proceedings. Would you please lower —

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** Here we have two bills before us dealing with amendments to the Old Age Pensions and Public Assistance Acts. These are two areas where, collectively—if we have responsibility to vulnerable groups in our society [*Crosstalk*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, [*Cell phone rings*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I would appreciate it if all persons with cellular phones would examine them and turn them off or put them to vibrate.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** We have two vulnerable groups in our society and not everybody who applied for public assistance did it with a free will. Some did it under duress because they do not want to be dependent on the State. Of course there are those who would be encouraged to apply for these things. The others are people with pride and would not sell their pride for something that would not be theirs.

When you talk about poverty, for example, housing, the ageing issue should deal with housing. We have to deal with our vulnerable groups seriously. When

they come to this Parliament and talk about political will, I have a problem with that. There is a history of neglect in this country. We talk about poverty being 40 per cent. In one year poverty jumped from 22 per cent to 40 per cent. When the UNC demitted office, poverty was 22 per cent; today, by their own admission, it is 40 per cent. What is causing this? Negligence. Here we have a country that was fighting poverty, looking for sustainable development and what do we see today?

The truckers in the programme being run by the Solid Waste Management Company Limited (SWMCOL) met with me this morning—and the Prime Minister can get up and deny this—and told me that they have not been paid since November of last year. I have been working with these groups. This is what creates uncertainty in our country.

When people use poverty or anything else to their advantage to win an election—whether it is violence, trying to shut people down, trying to create an impression that people are corrupt and so forth and continue doing it, they will have to live with it. Today, I am saying that poverty must be handled in such a way that we understand how to fight poverty. I am not against giving these people a bushwhacker to do certain things, but I have been told that only a certain number of people will be hired on these jobs and it is almost permanent employment. It will not be shared around.

Persons 16 years and over cannot work in the Urban Redevelopment Programme (URP). I am asking the hon. Minister to tell me where that started and how. Why can people between 16 and 65 not work URP? Mr. Deputy Speaker, in my own constituency of Chaguanas—and I know that when you were on this side you talked about your constituency and I know you will allow me to—it is not people from Chaguanas that work in the URP—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I thought you were talking about old people in Chaguanas.

**Mr. M. Ramsaran:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I prepared one page to talk on this afternoon, but when the hon. Minister talked about political will, that is a very strong term and I must reply. I can tell you that when this side were in office, we had the political will to do things that were spoken about by that side but was never done. I wanted them to examine our country today and they will see that when we were in government we increased old age pension by \$444 in six years and in their collective time that never happened. I wanted to put that on record.

We have a new Minister with responsibility for Social Services Delivery and he is free to go to my ministry to talk to the director and all the officers and he

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMSARAN]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

will discover that this Member never interfered with the running of the Ministry. I want to ask the hon. Minister, when he replies, to tell us about the shortage of staff in the Ministry. I received a phone call last week Wednesday from a lady in Sangre Grande who said she applied for old age pension or public assistance—I cannot remember which—more than six months ago and she is always being told that there is no officer to visit that particular district. I view this with alarm. Also in Chaguanas, a gentleman came to me this week and was talking about the same problem. He said that he was trying his best to have the officer visit him. When I called the office I was told that they had a shortage of staff and there is no officer to visit that particular district. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am putting this on record so that the Minister can respond. If he cannot respond this evening, he can check on it. When we talk about servicing people, we have to do that. He quite rightly said that in our country now the ageing population is increasing, so we cannot deal with them willy nilly.

Our hon. Minister of Finance, the Member for St. Joseph, was the chairman of a task force to harmonize our pension. What has happened to that committee? Is that committee functional? Are we to expect an increase in national insurance benefits soon? We must also put on record that the only increase in national insurance over time, from 1977 to the present time, took place in 1999 under the UNC.

We are calling on the Government to deal with our senior citizens in a manner that they will be proud of. The public servants who have retired still receive 1972 pensions—those who survive that long—which are now below that of the old age pensioner. This is something we have to look at because they too might disqualify themselves from being the recipients of old age pension because they receive some NIS pension. We have to take an overall review of pensions paid to our senior citizens.

I ask the Government not to deal with senior citizens and the vulnerable people in this country with contempt. Do not treat them as political pawns. They must be given treatment that would make them feel good to be Trinidadians and Tobagonians. They must be part of the oil boom that is expected. They must be part of the whole development process. They must ensure that houses are provided for them; that rebates on water rates are applicable to them, so that they will feel part of the society.

You must understand what is happening today, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let us take a Member of Parliament, for example, and the salary he received in the year 1962 in contrast to today. If that person had retired then, he would almost be a pauper. In all segments of our society we have that. We have teachers who

survive on a little pittance when they have reached their senior years, after having worked diligently. There are people who are now retired and living on small pensions and there are families that will take home \$5,000 per month, while others take home \$50.

We have to understand this; we have to forget the politics. We have to forget about who is in office and who is not. We have to deal with the plight of our vulnerable groups. People with disabilities who will be accessing our disability allowance grant must not be treated with contempt. I have had examples of people who were disabled and who were denied disability. We need to understand that we have to treat our people with care and attention. We have to make them feel dignified. They must not be allowed to feel poor. The fact that we have 40 per cent poverty is no fault of the UNC. The UNC took it down to 22 per cent and it was going down. As a matter of fact, the United Nations Development report said that Trinidad and Tobago, at one time, had 5 per cent poverty and now it is back to 40 per cent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, that statistics sometimes can mislead us, but for political purposes let us forget the percentages. We must not allow this to continue. When we debate the Finance Bill, we are going to point out some irregularities that we see there, of moneys being misspent.

Today, let us focus on our senior citizens and persons with disabilities. Let us ensure that when we meet our maker, we would have treated with our people and given them that respect.

I thank you.

**The Minister in the Ministry of Trade and Industry (Hon. Diane Seukeran):** I rise to support the two bills that our Government has brought—the Bill to amend the Public Assistance Act and—might I point out the words—to validate certain things done thereunder. The second Bill is to amend the Old Age Pensions Act and to validate certain things done thereunder.

It struck me, as I was listening to the hon. Member for Chaguanas and past Minister of Social Development, that I kept hearing from him, “could of”, “would of”, “should of” and more than anything else, “did not”. It might not rhyme, but “did not”. There was this huge pathos in his voice; that act and air of piety and the wringing of hands as if he were “Pontius Pilate” himself, as he talked about what could have or should have been done.

I listened to what he was saying and looked at the words that introduced the Bill—“an Act...to validate certain things done thereunder”. If we were to look at the legislation we are correcting, we will see that the dates we are beginning to

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[HON. D. SEUKARAN]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

validate begin on October 01, 2000. I agree with much of what the hon. Member for Chaguaramas has said in terms of the content, in terms of the fact that there are so many poor in our society and that we need to look after our poor and our young and vulnerable within the society.

We ask ourselves why, in the year 2003, are we now validating actions taken in the year 2000? If the pious Member opposite, who speaks as though he were Portia himself, were serious in what he said; or the government of yesterday, that is today in some degree of chaos perhaps, but nonetheless was the government yesterday, were serious about poverty alleviation, about caring for the elderly, about old age pension, about social disability and all of the things of which he so piously read, we would not be here today validating these Acts because they were in government.

We have fulfilled pledges made by them in raising these things as far back as 2000—three years. We paid the \$800. We raised it to \$1,000. We did things and we are validating what they did. Why did they not validate and why are we validating today? Because those wonderful, caring, pious gentlemen would not sit in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago and do the people's business. Words, they are full of words, semantics, but where is the action? Where is the heart? In that piety, there is great merit in what he says, but it is merit that we in the PNM are taking to heart. [*Interruption*] I will not give way.

I listened to the learned Member and I wondered if, perhaps, he ought to be reminded that he should stay in his crease—play cricket. He should not ask for extra time. That is for football and he does not play it very well. I was listening to the many Freudian slips—“our money”, “my ministry”—as he played along. Perhaps his learned colleagues should encourage him not to ask for extra time. That is football. He plays cricket. He should stay in his crease.

We wondered what all this was about when I heard the word “holistic” in his language. We all speak the same language, but I wonder whether we mean the same things when we use words. I do not know where in the dictionary of the last government the word “holistic” applies. They use words to say they are increasing pension. They use words to say social services and disability grants. They talk about old age and decreasing the level to 60 years, but what were they doing all of those years and where was he? When they lost the election, when they tried to steal an election in the year 2000 and when, in 2001, the grace of God worked and we came into power, they refused, like a petulant child, to sit and do the people's work. I listening to all of that and what was a very dull debate, suddenly got lively. Not only did my learned Leader bring some life into the air, but my own



blood began to pulse. I am very happy to have the Member for Caroni Central sitting opposite to me as I wax warm.

They talked about cohesion. They talked about acting in the public interest. But what do they do? Stay home because they are not in the leadership chair. That is nonsense. I want to use the word “holistic” and what the gentlemen ought to mean. We are dealing with old age pension and public assistance. In other words, we are targeting the vulnerable within the society.

I listened to the question of the flour increase, the 22 per cent in the price of flour, and the argument for subsidization. I wondered whether we live in the same times and whether there was any acknowledgement of the free market economy and that one ought to be using those methods instead of subsidization.

The Member for Chaguanas, although he sat in the relevant Ministry at the time, is not aware of the meaning of the word “holistic”. We believe in holistic planning and holistic delivery of essential services to all the citizens, but particularly to those vulnerable in our society, especially the old and the young. So, I would like to look at holistic planning, and not subsidization; to look at the delivery of services so as to do what these are intended to do—to alleviate the suffering of the many poor within our society.

Sir, look at the meagre increase. They had one increase in social disability of \$80, when they built an airport for how much; when we are still building an airport after spending \$1.6 billion; when there was such nepotism within this country, such profligate spending as if money meant nothing? There was a time when we said money was no problem. Those were words. There was a time when the original Leader of this Government said that money was no problem because of the oil boom and what oil meant to Trinidad and Tobago at a time when the price of oil went from \$2.00 to wherever it went. Sir, those people across there acted as though there was no faucet to turn off. Money was not only no problem, but they could drown in it.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Would you please take your seat for a second? I know you are waxing warm and I did not intend to stop you, but please address them as hon. Members.

**Hon. D. Seukeran:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I apologize. It must be my newness.

The question then of how one spent money in the face of such poverty; of how one plans for, not subsidization in terms of poverty alleviation, but in terms of meaningful measures intended to alleviate poverty and improve the quality of life of all the citizens, particularly the more vulnerable in the society.

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[HON. D. SEUKARAN]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

Look at what this Government is doing. We have a special unit under the purview of the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, that is delivering what we intend in order to alleviate poverty; this even while we take a good look and come up with the right measures to alleviate poverty. It is 40 per cent. I do not know why the Member for Chaguanas kept saying that he did not know anything about 40 per cent; he knew about 20 per cent and that once it was 5 per cent and now it got to 40 per cent. Perhaps he has to ask himself where the \$1.6 billion went. He has to ask himself where all the money went and why poverty went from 5 to 22 to 40 per cent in Trinidad and Tobago? Poverty has existed here all the time and it is increasing because we continue to waste money, to throw it at all measures in an ad hoc manner. *[Interruption]* Well, I am an inclusive woman and, therefore, when I say “we”, I mean you. I am too polite to point it out in any other way.

Let me talk about holistic planning. What is the Government of Trinidad and Tobago doing? We talk about the newness of all of this. The People’s National Movement, which was the party that formed the Government of Trinidad and Tobago for 40 years and more, prior to the advent of the last government, did several things, one of which was bringing education to all the people. The true way of alleviating poverty is by empowering people through education. *[Interruption]* It was the People’s National Movement in the Parliament, led by Dr. Eric Williams, in which there were certain very distinguished gentlemen sitting on the opposite side.

Not only was there free schooling, but there was the School Feeding Programme, which began originally in Chaguanas as the School Nutrition Programme and then became the School Feeding Programme in the 1990s. This is a programme, which today alleviates poverty. When we say poverty, it is not only of the aged or the infirmed, it is the entire sector which is vulnerable, including the children. Those children have parents and many of those parents are recalcitrant and delinquent and so the children are being brought up by grandparents, old age pensioners, who feel the brunt of what is going on.

We serve 2,500 breakfasts per day. We serve 70,000 school meals daily and of these are recipients either on a daily basis or three times per week. This is how we are dealing with the problems that affect the aged and infirmed, the vulnerable.

There are special schools. We are not claiming that the special schools began with the PNM. It began with the churches substantially. For instance, there is a school for the deaf by the Anglicans. There is a school for the blind, which a PNM government started in the 1960s. There is the Lady Hochoy Home, again, started in the 1960s by the governor’s wife. There was the Princess Elizabeth Home,

which began when Princess Elizabeth, before she was Queen, got married. There is a home for severely retarded men. In Cocorite, there is vocational teaching which started in the mid-1960s for the mentally retarded and Down Syndrome children. In the south, there is the Pointe-a-Pierre special school. In Couva, in the 1970s, the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education, of a PNM government started, a school to teach functional literacy. I am not quite sure if that school still exists.

However, the care for the special children who might benefit under the Public Assistance Act has been there forever. Today the Government of Trinidad and Tobago intends to merge those special schools so that children who are special can come into the mainstream and behave like normal. Why should they be singled out because they are a little slow? Why should they be lonely because they are a little slow? One is born that way; one does not ask to become that way and he/she could be anybody's child. [*Interruption*] It could be your child. Perhaps, you were one of the special children.

There are special schools that we are now merging with joint guidance programmes. There is the diagnostic ability within the schools so that slow learners get tested and fewer and fewer children slip through the cracks to come out of there—children who do not fit within the social framework and who might either be very unhappy and react in ways inimical to the social well-being of the country.

There are many things done within the school system. There was of course the book grant. I was a recipient of the old book grant when I won a bursary. That was closed down. Last year we began a schoolbook project where we gave secondary school children \$1,000 and where the primary school children were given books: all of these inform the Bills before us.

The Member for Chaguanas keeps saying the \$1,000 is insufficient. I am trying to show how we add to the pie by the various measures that this Government is determined upon. So here we are, working towards a book rental programme. There are existing programmes that affect children—and I am sure that the past Minister would know of, for instance, public officers who die while on duty. Their children in these circumstances can benefit from books and other needs.

Then we, in terms of holistic planning and genuine commitment to those vulnerable within our society came to the question—and my hon. Colleague touched upon it—transport costs for the people who are in receipt of old age pension. What did we do? We started, in the 1970s, with free school transport for children on the bus service. Then, in 1981, in the Chambers government, senior citizens and

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[HON. D. SEUKARAN]

Wednesday, January 22, 2003

the handicapped were added to travel freely using the bus service. *[Interruption]* That started in 1981 with Chambers. In fact, the subsidies for the period of the 1980s were close to \$100 million. In 1989 that was reformed and we added the maxi-taxis to reach into the rural communities—Biche, Toco, Matelot, Icacos: all of those areas. One hundred and eighty-three maxis were added.

But what did the last government do? *[Interruption]* In 1991, Madam, you forget we were in the heart of a recession; that the price of oil had gone, where? I know that we have memories of today but, surely, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Couva South is a vastly intelligent Member of this House who must appreciate what happens when we lose income from oil, the base and root of our economy?

I keep asking myself how the Members opposite keep being so obscure that they cannot understand. How do they sit in this Parliament without understanding the economy of Trinidad and Tobago? The price of oil governs what we do and I am sure that the hon. Member for Siparia understands fully what I mean. In 1991, we were in the heart of the recession. But in June 2000, under the last regime, there came into being something called the rural service bus transportation. Sir, you will remember that 45 buses were bought to access these communities. Today, January 2003, two and a half years later, we have 25 buses left. What did we buy? How did we spend the money? This is why I say they genuinely lived as though the taps would never run dry and there was no faucet to turn off.

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Will the Member give way?

**Hon. D. Seukeran:** No, the Member will not give way. That Member has spoken at great length, testing one's patience and one's ear.

We are talking about holistic planning again, these are some of the things the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is doing. Fundamentally, one uses planning. When we say that we wish to take this country to developed nation status, what does that mean, Sir? Does it mean that it is a word outside there, a mission statement that has no linkage to all sectors of the economy? I assure you, Sir, that I was talking about all the things an old PNM government of yesteryear, planning ahead to alleviate the plight of those vulnerable in our society.

When we say developed nation status, it means that all of the programmes, to bring quality of life to all of the citizens, are being implemented, including those who suffer disability. I agreed fully with the Member for Chaguanas when he talked about the need for special infrastructural amenities for those who are disadvantaged in that way. I point out to him that developed nation status means

exactly that. The pavements will be wheelchair friendly. There will be ramps into buildings. Old people will not have to line up outside in the hot sun without bathroom facilities. All of those things come with developed nation status and they take time, but help will be there for all these people.

I heard him touch on housing. The cost of a piece of land in Philipine in the south is \$60,000. That has to be prime land. What did they do about that? They were in government yesterday. In the PNM manifesto, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago talks about granny suites. We want to look after our pensioners. We want to look after our grandmothers, because unlike some people, we understand that the child is father of the man. We understand that one says and means: "Honour thy father and thy mother that thy days may be long in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee". We on this side intend to live to a long, long old age because we meaningfully look after our old. Hence the concept of granny suites in the Ministry of Housing, that is social service.

I do not need to tell you about social services, there are so many projects that are usually there. Also, there are those vulnerable within our society who are young. For many of the reasons the Minister said, we look after them.

I was sad to hear the attack launched against the Solid Waste Management Company Limited (SWMCOL). It is such an excellent project that has cleaned up the environment as no other project has; a project in which young men and women wear uniforms of blue, with pride. I hear Members opposite pulling it down. I am so sad about that.

There are all of these things that we talk about when we talk about social services in particular. In general, I agree with a statement made by the Member for Chaguanas when he talked about the security and said that we could not be divided upon it. You know the aged, Sir, and the people who are looking to public assistance and the whole host of this country are looking forward to security.

The country is insecure—for the purpose of crime because we are a country that is divided along racial lines, a country that is so divided that it is eating itself and not looking at the external foes. There are external foes unless one is blind and cannot see what is going on in the rest of the world.

The greatest malingerers, who call themselves nationals of Trinidad and Tobago, have perpetrated this division and I am heartened to have heard the Member for Chaguanas talking about unity. It is this unity that we call upon when we ask the other side to support the Police Service Act and all the Acts we bring to this Parliament to protect the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Will the Member get back to the—

**Hon. D. Seukeran:** I will wind up. I am only touching on these things because I wanted to say how undue and inefficient it was of the last government to have us come here to validate certain acts that were beneficial to the public of Trinidad and Tobago.

In his wonderful meanderings, the hon. Member for Chaguanas stirred the flow somewhat and this normal, passive House was moved to remembering things old and I simply sought to remind him of that. Thank you.

**Mr. Harry Partap (Nariva):** Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I join the debate this evening to make some comments on the Bill before this honourable House and these are: the Bill to amend the Old Age Pensions Act and the Bill to amend the Public Assistance Act.

These two Bills also make provision for the validation of certain things already done in anticipation of the approval of this Parliament. In other words, the passing of these two pieces of legislation will ensure that the recipients of old age pension and public assistance do not have to repay the increases they were given on or after October 1, 2001 and January 1, 2002.

The Member for San Fernando West tried to make it appear that we, on this side, were inefficient. In her haste to credit her Government with efficiency, I must tell her that these Bills were brought for validation three months after the election. I would imagine that in the first sitting of the House this could have been dealt with. *[Interruption]* That year we had no power and he knows that.

**Hon. Member:** Why did they not have power?

**Mr. H. Partap:** Because the President had given your leader the opportunity to convene the House and he could not get the majority. This is why, in their inefficiency, these Bills are before us three months later.

We will always support measures intended to assist the elderly, those who are disabled and those who are poor, once those measures are evenly distributed and accessible to all who qualify under the rules. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you recognize a civilized society by the way it treats its poor, its elderly, its disabled and its women. You also recognize a civilized society by the mechanisms and resources used to ensure that those who can least afford to look after themselves are provided for out of the public purse.

Indeed, as was already alluded to by my colleague, the Member for Chaguanas, the UNC government, led by our distinguished leader, Mr. Basdeo Panday, the

Member for Couva North, had brought old age pension and public assistance to a dignified level during the six years we were in office. We did not do this at election time. We raised the pension and public assistance on five occasions and they were never done at election time, unlike those opposite where everything is geared toward an election.

Others are merely following the example we had set. When the PNM government had given miserly increases, I think they range from \$9.15 to \$30—the level of increases the PNM gave during their period in office—we in the UNC, in the six years that we spent there, raised pensions by over \$444. We had set the pattern so that they could carry it through.

They increased pensions by \$80 and went on in the second instance to raise it to \$200, so they are merely following the leader, the UNC. The country can say that we forced them to have a social conscience or they would never have had a social conscience. Everything for them is geared towards elections. While others use caring as an election cliché, the UNC demonstrated its commitment to provide the poor, the elderly and the differently-abled with financial assistance to stay above the poverty line.

I hope we will be mercifully spared, and I do pray that we will be mercifully spared, political interference in the public assistance and old age pension programmes. Every programme in this country is tainted by politics through the PNM. They have put the heavy hand of politics on every single thing. I hope that the old age pension and public assistance programmes will not be corrupted by the PNM.

Of course, I cannot say the same for the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development. The Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development has now become a PNM party group, creating jobs for the big boys and girls.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member for Nariva, we are dealing with public assistance and old age pension, and unless you show me the relevance of what you are going to say, I suggest that you do not go in that direction.

**Mr. H. Partap:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know that I will always follow your directions. I am simply saying that the old age pensioners are getting \$1,000 a month. In the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development, which was once responsible for pensions and public assistance, there are contract packages worth \$23,000.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please do not go there, hon. Member. You are being very clever, but remember I sat where you sat? Do not go there, please.

**Mr. H. Partap:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for our guidance and I assure you that I am not going to take off my coat in the House.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** If you are so minded, but do not go there!

**Mr. H. Partap:** Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So that \$1,000 to pensioners when some people are getting a \$23,000 per month package or a \$25,000 a month package and being sent to Canada.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, if you go back there, I will have to deal with you. Please do not do that.

**Mr. H. Partap:** Thank you very much and I assure you I am not going to go there. I am going to sail away from that point at the moment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is a pity that the Government did not use the opportunity to amend the Old Age Pensions Act in order to relieve further old age pensions. I remember your ruling so I am not going further on that.

In our 2002 Manifesto, at page 2, which was read by the hon. Member for Chaguanas, we said that a UNC government would have reduced the age to access old age pension to 60 years. By doing this, we would have brought the age for old age pension in line with the normal retirement age of 60. This was one of our manifesto proposals.

At the present time a large cadre of workers, with no pension benefits through employment, are forced to retire at 60 and must wait another five years to access the old age pension. We are creating a new class of poor by this system. I hope that the Minister will look at this matter with a sympathetic eye and there is also the appeal to increase the income ceiling in determining the eligibility of old age pension.

The UNC had first introduced the disability assistance grant for persons 40 years and over suffering from a permanent disability. This was in 1996. The grant was then \$600 per month. The grant was not available to persons with permanent disability under the age of 40 years.

They were covered by what is now called, in the Social Welfare Division, a necessitous grant. I will say no more about this necessitous grant, which I wish the Minister to consider when I do make the point a little later during the course of my contribution.

**3.30 p.m.**

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the introduction of the disability assistance grant was a major move by the UNC government to include a wide variety of disabilities not



covered by the normal Public Assistance Programme. The social net was extended by the UNC to include persons with psychiatric illnesses and who had a family to maintain but were unable to work. It also covered persons who were below the old age pension age but could not work due to cardiac ailments or strokes or were bedridden. So that the disability grant, Mr. Deputy Speaker, also assisted persons who suffered physical, mental and even intellectual impairment due to motor vehicle and other accidents. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the extent of the disability assistance grant coverage was of great help to many who suffered in silence as they and their families were pushed into poverty. The move that we made was indeed a major one and it assisted many, many people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the amendment to the Public Assistance Act now being discussed does not make any specific reference to the other grants emanating out of the Public Assistance Programme. One such grant, as I mentioned earlier, is the necessitous grant of \$80 a month. The necessitous grant of \$80 a month goes to people who are permanently disabled, they are under 40 years of age, but they cannot access the full Disability Assistance Programme. Some of these patients are confined to wheelchairs and some are, as I said, permanently bedridden. They suffer from cancer, cerebral palsy and other diseases and they just cannot move. Unfortunately, many of these victims are children.

I am told, hon. Minister, that the payment of these necessitous grants within recent months has been irregular and does not reach recipients on a timely basis. It might be one thing that your ministry can look at to ensure that these people do get it on time. I make an appeal to the hon. Member for San Fernando East and Prime Minister, who I understand controls the Social Welfare Division from his office, to try to provide a reasonable increase for this necessitous grant. Indeed, \$80 a month to upkeep a child or an adult who is incapacitated is definitely insufficient and needs to be reviewed.

I know that the UNC had planned to reduce the age for access to the disability assistance grant to 18 years in the first instance with the possibility of completely removing the age qualification to facilitate young people and children so stricken. I invite the hon. Prime Minister to give some consideration to our appeal on behalf of these unfortunate people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the Government can find \$75 million to finance the PNM party's Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP), in its grass cutting programme, it can find money to help the people with permanent disabilities. I will tell the Member for San Fernando East

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. PARTAP]

Wednesday, January 22, 2003

that really we have no real idea on whether we approve of that or not. The fact is, it is a public programme and it should be open to all people.

**Mr. Manning:** But it is open.

**Mr. H. Partap:** No, it is not, Mr. Prime Minister. It is not! It is partisan! It is open only to PNM party members. *[Interruption]* You can say what you want but, Mr. Prime Minister, I understand that it is on your instructions that this is emanating. What we are seeing on the road—and it is becoming so obnoxious that when we pass and see these people on the road in their blue uniforms, who are they? They are PNM supporters! *[Interruption]*

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** How do you know that?

**Mr. H. Partap:** I ask them and they do tell me that. *[Laughter]* In fact, they attended the function in Port of Spain on Saturday and the Prime Minister went with his PNM jersey. *[Interruption]* Oh, you want more evidence? You want more evidence than that? These people who are cutting grass on the road, they went into Port of Spain in a big rally to demonstrate their talent. Talent with what? Grass cutting?

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Who paid the transport?

**Mr. H. Partap:** This is what we want to find out, who paid the transport? Who paid for all the shark and bake and all the rum and roti that was at the function? Who paid for it?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker.** Hon. Member, get back and let us deal with the important level of pensions.

**Mr. H. Partap:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know I would never want to override your ruling but I simply wanted the Member for San Fernando East to know that what we are against is the partisan nature of the programme. Open it to everybody, all the young people in the country, and you will have our support.

**Mr. Manning:** We are doing that.

**Mr. H. Partap:** No! “Look, eh—look, leh me continue.”

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Deal with the pensions. Tie it in to pensions, please?

**Mr. H. Partap.** Mr. Deputy Speaker, in fact, when our hon. Prime Minister attended that function in Port of Spain, he apologized for having his PNM jersey. I say he has no need to apologize. He should not apologize. What you must apologize for is using public funds for party business. That is what you must

apologize for. You must apologize for using public money for party supporters alone. That is what you must apologize for. Wear your PNM jersey. I have nothing to do with that. You could do it, right, and you could even burn it if you want.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am really surprised that all the corruption hunters, the people who were looking at the UNC to find out all the things that the UNC used to do, where are they now? How come they cannot investigate CEPEP? That is of no interest to them, maybe.

**Mr. Ramsaran:** “Dey geh ah ten days.”

**Mr. H. Partap:** I tell you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the House last Friday, one of the newspapers reported how I said that CEPEP is a good programme. I never said CEPEP is a good programme. I said NEDCO was a good programme and it is now being politicized to the worst extent.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, I mean, on the one hand, what does NEDCO and reporters have to do with this statement? [*Interruption*] No, he was referring to NEDCO and what he said and what a reporter reported him as saying.

**Mr. H. Partap:** Okay, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me get back to the point so that you can sit comfortably.

I was making the point that we wanted a reasonable increase in the necessitous grant. I would also make the point that I feel certain the hon. Prime Minister will respond as swiftly as he did with respect to the child, Destiny. However, Mr. Prime Minister, I will tell you that it would not be as much as US \$475 that people want. They could get something a little less than that, but maybe a thousand dollars might be a good amount for the necessitous grant.

I noted that in the Public Assistance (Amdt. and Validation) Act, 2003, provision was made in clauses 4 and 5 to increase the disability assistance grant. However, no similar provision was made for other increases in grants announced by the hon. Prime Minister in his Budget Speech. It is my understanding that many people are enquiring when these increases will be effective and therefore I will listen very attentively to the hon. Minister when he closes the debate this afternoon.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is need for some kind of harmonization of the old age pension and the National Insurance benefits. The current situation is that retired workers who meet the requirement for old age pension and are in receipt of the NIS benefits receive \$100 less in old age pension than a pensioner who does not receive NIS benefits. I think this is what is taking place now. In fact, that is

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. PARTAP]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

taking place right now in the system. This is an anomaly which is defended on the grounds that a retired worker draws a benefit from the NIS while the pensioner is not that fortunate.

The argument does not take into consideration the fact that the retired worker is contributing. He is merely receiving benefits which he had contributed during his years of working and, therefore, the anomaly really penalizes the retired worker for contributing to a benefit in his retirement. The anomaly really penalizes the retired worker for contributing to a benefit in his retirement and it rewards the pensioner who did not contribute to a benefit but depended wholly on the State to finance his pension.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the semantics of the argument could be avoided if the NIS benefits could be ignored when granting the old age pension to a retired worker. That is one way in which you can deal with it. Therefore, the hon. Minister should consider giving all old age pension recipients the full \$1,000 per month rather than to have it in two brackets. Once we consider it, you can consider it. I throw it out for your consideration. You have been considering so many other things, you may as well consider it. *[Interruption]* We are not the government; you are in Government. The people elected you to do their work. Do the people's work.

This is an opportune time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to remind the hon. Prime Minister of his election promise to bring NIS benefits to the level of old age pensions. He made that promise on the election campaign and we are holding him to that promise, to raise the NIS pension to the level of old age pensions. I am simply asking him to put it into operation. *[Interruption]* Yes, because, we will be holding you to your promise and I am sure you will keep your promise. I assure you that we on this side will never allow you to use old age pension as political propaganda. We will not do that and it is your duty as a Government to meet the needs of the underprivileged in our country, and I hope you will take your duties seriously.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, while the amendments to the Old Age Pensions Act, 2002 put an additional \$280 in the hands of old age pensioners, they are still at a serious disadvantage. They are at a disadvantage because of the steep increase in the cost of living, and my colleague, the hon. Member for Chaguanas, has already alluded to this. As you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there has been an increase in the price of flour by some 22 per cent and, between January 2002 and January 2003, the price of flour rose three times. We understand that rice is the next one on the list and this may go up next month.

Surely rice and flour are staple food products and, for all the products associated with rice and flour, I am sure that there is going to be a price increase as well. I am told too that the price of cooking oil and some classes of peas will also be increased. So all these impact on the old age pensioner who has to face the grocery as any one of us. Therefore, it seems to me that what you are giving with your right hand you are taking back with your left and we ask you to consider this. The Member for Chaguanas has already given a recommendation, which I hope you will consider during the course of your deliberations.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is quite obvious now that the increase in pensions and public assistance, as indicated in the two Bills before us today, will be of no use to the recipients if we do not address this matter of the high cost of living. Indeed, as I said, I hope that the hon. Minister will answer some of these questions, address the lowering of the ceiling of the old age pension, allow all disabled to have access to the disability assistance grant and I hope that he will provide some interim measure for an increase in the necessitous grant.

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

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I think it is necessary for me to join this debate to deal with some of the misinformation put in the system by the Member for Nariva and the Member for Chaguanas in particular. I saw the Member for Chaguanas get all hot and bothered under the collar, screaming about some alleged hurt that was done to him by the hon. Prime Minister. The fact is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are consistent reports that, while the Member for Chaguanas was the minister in charge of this area, the old age pension portfolio and the disability grant, the then minister changed the criteria for persons who would qualify for a disability grant.

Now, my understanding of the criteria for the disability grant is that you are entitled to receive this benefit if you are disabled to the point that you cannot work. So that you may be crippled, you may have a serious heart condition or some other chronic ailment or disability that would prevent you from securing meaningful employment and, as a consequence, the persons who access this benefit have to go through inspection and investigation and have to prove to the Ministry of Social Development or the Social Welfare Department that they are, in fact, disabled and cannot work, and whatever ailment they suffer from is so chronic that they are deserving of a disability grant.

My understanding is—and there is no point in the Member getting up here and carrying on and shouting and screaming. We need to deal with facts. My understanding is that, while he was minister, the criteria changed and persons who

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[HON. C. IMBERT]

Wednesday, January 22, 2003

have ailments that are not considered to be that chronic to cause them to be unfit for work such as hypertension, which is commonly known as high blood pressure, and diabetes, that the Minister of Social Development, under the former UNC administration, widened the scope of the disability grant to include people with high blood pressure and diabetes. That is my understanding and that is the issue with which he has to deal. He, I think, would be unable to truthfully say that under his tenure no person suffering with hypertension or diabetes was admitted for this disability grant, and it was radical departure from the previous policy of determining whether the person had a real disability.

I also understand that, in widening the scope of the criteria for persons who could receive the disability grant, he also kept it a secret. So that it was a certain privileged group of persons who was able to benefit from the former minister's generosity. I hope I have put things in perspective and the Member for Chaguanas could scream, he could turn red in the face, he could carry on all he wants, but I challenge him to say that, under his tenure, persons with hypertension and diabetes were not recipients of the disability grant.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** He cannot.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** He cannot. You know, we need to speak the truth when we come into this Parliament. All this carrying on will not save you. Now that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this former minister—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Will you give way?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** No I will not. Now that this former minister has put this issue into the public domain in such a controversial way, [*Interruption*] I think what we will have to do is go into the Ministry's records and bring the information to this Parliament so that it would be there in the full glare of the public. That is what we shall do.

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, on a point of order. [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** The Member is addressing me on a point of order. What is the point of order?

**Mr. Ramsaran:** The conduct of a Member should never be challenged in this Parliament without a motion. [*Laughter*] [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** State your point of order. What is it? [*Interruption*]  
No, he has to state it.

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Thirty-six.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thirty-six what?

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Thirty-six what?

**Mr. Ramnath:** You have no evidence.

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Thirty-six five.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please continue, Member. Please continue.

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, 36(5). I want you to rule on it.

**Mr. Ramnath:** You are misleading the House. You have no information.  
[*Interruption*]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Ramnath:** “Mauvais langue.” [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I am hearing you, Member for Siparia, however, when I need your legal advice I will get it. Thank you.

**Mr. Ramnath:** “You cyar come to this House and lie.”

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** You were saying, Member for Chaguanas, 36(5). It says:

“No Member shall impute improper motives to any other Member of either Chamber.”

It does not apply. Could you please proceed?

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is a bad ruling.

**Hon. C. Imbert.** [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Deputy Speaker, he knows it does not apply, you know. He knows. You see—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Where is the evidence? Where is the evidence?

**Hon. C Imbert:** When, [*Interruption*] when [*Interruption*] when persons in positions of public responsibility [*Interruption*] change the rules to suit themselves and to suit their friends and supporters, that is—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Ramsaran:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, improper motive. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 36(5). What is happening in this Parliament? [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I have already ruled.

**Mr. Ramsaran:** No, but he said it again, “friends and family”. I object to that, 36(5), Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I have already ruled. Continue.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I “doh” know why the Member for Chaguanas is so hot under the collar.

**Mr. Ramsaran:** No, I am gone; I am gone.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** I “doh” know why he is so hot under the collar.

**Mr. Ramsaran:** No, I am gone. I “cyar” stay in this House and be treated like that. *[Interruption]* *[Laughter]* Improper motives. *[Laughter]* I cannot do that. *[Interruption]*

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** How you all taking so long to go home?

**Mr. Ramsaran:** I cannot—I cannot stay in this honourable House—*[Interruption]* I am gone. I cannot sit here and do it.

*[Mr. Ramsaran leaves Chamber]*

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Wait, I thought you all Leader said to go home? You all not leaving? Who is the Leader on that side?

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, what amazes me is that I was in this Parliament for six years on that side—*[Interruption]* I was in this Parliament for six years on that side as a Member of the Opposition and the insults and the invective and the wild allegations—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, let us move on and deal with the matter.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The things that were hurled at us on that side, we did not get on like little children, pick up our bat and ball and go home. Children! “Cyar take pressure.” Anyway, Mr. Deputy Speaker—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Ramnath:** You must come with evidence to substantiate your arguments.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** What amazes me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the statements—*[Interruption]*—the statements that have been made by Members on the other side. *[Interruption]* Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will have to ask you to, am—I will have to ask for your protection. I want protection.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Members, would you please—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Ramnath:** You are lying in the House!

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Member for Couva South, please! Just go ahead. Continue.



**Hon. C. Imbert:** A bunch of children. Anyway, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I could hear the former Minister of Labour say that the Ministry of Labour has now become a PNM party group, that Member for Nariva took out an injunction against WASA workers—[*Interruption*]*—*that Member for Nariva took out an injunction against WASA workers [*Interruption*] and, Mr. Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please. When the Member went there I tried to get him to leave that area. Do not go there.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but it is “Do as I say but not as I do.” That is their motto, “Do as I say but not as I do.” You know, the Member for Couva North told the nurses, “Who want to go could go.” He told them, “No work no pay”, but now he saying that—[*Interruption*]*—*now he is saying that conditions of slavery exist in Trinidad and Tobago. So it is “Do as I say but not as I do” but let us go back, Mr. Deputy Speaker. [*Interruption*] No, I will not stick to what you want me to stick to. [*Interruption*]

The Member for Nariva made the absurd suggestion that everybody in Trinidad and Tobago should receive a pension of \$1,000 whether they get NIS or whether they have another source of income or not. He was in a government for six years which instituted a regime—a two-tiered system—which recognized the fact that somebody with no income should get the maximum pension and someone with a limited income should get a slightly lower income. For six years that was the two-tiered regime instituted by them but, you know, the PNM administration, this Government, has been in power now just for three months, this particular Government—

**Mr. Singh:** “Doh try dat.”

**Hon. C. Imbert:**—for three months, and what they could not do in six years, they want us to do in three months. I heard the Member for Chaguanas boast about how they increased pension by \$400; however, they took six years to increase the pension by \$400. The caring PNM increased pension by \$200 in one year—[*Interruption*]*—*in one year. So in one year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we increased pension by 50 per cent of what they took six years to do. We have increased the old age pension, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by 25 per cent in one year. Do not let them fool you with their “ole talk”, you know; from \$800 to \$1,000 is a 25 per cent increase in pension.

You see, what I find particularly disappointing—[*Interruption*]*—*what I find particularly disappointing about the other side is that they are in a permanent state of “tabanca”. The election of 1991 has already occurred. The election of 1986 has

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[HON. C. IMBERT]

Wednesday, January 22, 2003

already occurred. The election of 1995 has already occurred. “You cyar come in this Parliament and “talk about what PNM do in 1972 and 1979 and what PNM do in 1983 and so on.” It is absolutely irrelevant—[*Interruption*] As my colleague from Diego Martin Central is always saying, once the market [*Interruption*] has discounted something, it is of no value. The people of Trinidad and Tobago have already adjudicated on the policies of the PNM versus the policies of the UNC. [*Desk thumping*] That is why we are here and you are there.

**Mr. Ramnath:** Robinson adjudicated, not the people. That is why you went and bow to him. [*Interruption*]

**Hon. C. Imbert:** You know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, [*Interruption*] I am hoping—[*Interruption*—I am hoping that at some point in time [*Interruption*] before the year 2015, because I used to sit over there and “it had someone used to sit over here” and say, “You will be there until 2015” but now we are here and he is there. [*Interruption*] [*Laughter*] So that, I am hoping that sometime before the year 2015 they can get out of this state of “tabanca”, this state of post election shock syndrome that they are in, [*Interruption*] this mental crisis that exists on the other side, so we could get down to some meaningful work in this country. I hope they get over their “tabanca” very soon. It has been going on for a long time now. It has been going on for more than a year and I hope they get over it.

I simply want to say one more thing, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have heard the Member for Chaguanas talking about our programme of free medication for pensioners and it is interesting that he would talk about that, because, not only has the caring PNM increased old age pension by 25 per cent in one year but the caring PNM next month, in the month of February 2003, will introduce its chronic disease free medication programme for pensioners. [*Desk thumping*] So we are not just giving them a 25 per cent increase in pension, but we are going to give them free medication.

Do you know what amazes me? In the six years that that regime blighted this land, they had so many doctors on their side but they had no compassion, and they had no feelings for our elderly and our pensioners, and those brilliant practitioners on that side could not come up with a concept for giving free medication to our senior citizens who have toiled long and hard in the vineyard, who have given their service to this country. It took this PNM administration to come up with that and it is just the beginning.

So from the middle of February or towards the end of February, Mr. Deputy Speaker, your caring PNM administration will commence the implementation of its free medication programme for pensioners, yet another social service being

implemented by a progressive and modern administration. [*Desk thumping*] So that when I hear the “tabancic”, if that is the correct word, or the “tarangic”, the “fouffouroufic” and frantic cries on the other side, when I hear the Freudian slips, as the Member for San Fernando West said, when the Member for Chaguanas talks about “going back into my ministry”, you know, this withdrawal, this feeling of terrible, you know, depression that is obvious on that side, [*Interruption*] you know, I just feel sorry for them, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, I feel happy for the people of Trinidad and Tobago [*Desk thumping*] because I am certain that the prophecy of the Member for Couva North will now apply to him and he will be there and we will be here until 2015.

I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption*—in the first instance.

**Mr. Kelvin Ramnath** (*Couva South*): [*Desk thumping*] Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am very pleased that the plight of people who deserve some improvement in their quality of life is being addressed today. I must admit, however, that the last speaker did no justice to the amendment before us, but instead sought to ingratiate himself with his leader, sought to apologize for his conduct in recent times with his leader, having expressed in public support for another leader in his party. So one could understand the predicament in which he finds himself. He comes and uses a very important debate not only to apologize for his conduct in recent times and even before that, he comes here today to make unwarranted accusations and unsubstantiated accusations against a minister. [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Imbert:** Ah, Freudian slip!

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** I make Freudian slips when they relate to what Freud had originally intended [*Laughter*] for people my age; people like the Member for Diego Martin East who had to parade into Balisier House to prove to the leader of the party that he should get nominated even though I was told, very confidentially, that he was not fit to run in that seat. People who must apologize on an ongoing basis must begin to question themselves and I could understand that, having regard to his history, which is based on rape and plunder, a heritage—a colonial heritage, a heritage that exploited citizens of Trinidad and Tobago when his ancestry was riding horses and kicking black people in the sugar estates—[*Interruption*]

**Hon. Member:** Ooooooo!

**Mr. K. Ramnath:**—and the cocoa estates—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Valley:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, please—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** I could understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. B. Panday:** No, no, no, no, no! He started it!

**Mr. Valley:** What!

**Mr. B. Panday:** “Doh come with dat!” He started it!

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** Your great grandfather might have been one of the recipients, Member for Diego Martin Central. You never could tell.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Members, [*Interruption*] we are descending to some attacks that I think—you are talking about the parentage and the lineage of people. [*Interruption*]

**Mr. B. Panday:** [*Inaudible*]—when he attacks us.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I am speaking and I do not—if you propose to speak while I am standing, I would ask you, Member for Couva North, just to restrain yourself.

**Mr. B. Panday:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** [*Interruption*] You could do that and I will—if you choose. Please, hon. Member, I would like you to tone your language down and desist from the course that you are following.

**Mr. S. Panday:** Although you allow him to say—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** [*Interruption*] Thank you very much. You see—[*Interruption*] you see—[*Interruption*] Mr. Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption*] you see the difficulty one finds oneself in [*Interruption*] when the hon. Member for Diego Martin East chooses to go on a frolic of his own and get into matters into which he should not have gotten. It is behaviour like his unwarranted accusations, personal attacks and imputing improper motives that result in having to respond sometimes in this manner.

You should expect that any time an advisory from Washington, similar to the advisory that has come from the United Nations and the British government on the state of affairs in this country—and Australia—because of people like the Member for Diego Martin East, because of his outbursts—and when he uses this debate to talk about “those who want to go, go”, I want to advise him—[*Interruption*]—I want to advise him of the situation that obtained in Grenada many years ago. When the Grenadian government at that time, under Maurice Bishop, sought to bring certain people from Cuba to work in infrastructural development, particularly the Point Salines Airport, I wonder, Mr. Deputy

Speaker, whether the campaign by the Diego Martin East MP, Minister, a continuing campaign by him, against professionals in this country, threatening to import Cuban doctors, will not have a serious adverse impact on Washington's relationship with this country.

If I were in Washington—and we do not have to tell Washington as they argue. We do not have to tell Blair and London and Australia about what intelligence information they are privy to outside of this party—if I were in Washington I would be very careful if you import people with whom Washington has no diplomatic relationship, if you import people, professionals, who might very well be military doctors, into this country. We could very well face another problem—a serious problem. It is people who talk like him, and they talk too much, this pedestrian approach to government, [*Laughter*] that results in an environment and a situation which could have a very serious, deleterious effect on the stability of this country.

Do not forget what is happening next door. [*Interruption*] Do not forget what is happening in Venezuela. Do not forget what are Washington's views about what is happening in Venezuela. We are close to them. So I warn the Minister, for the sake of stability of this country, he should mind his mouth. He should be very careful. He should be very careful what he says in these debates. This is a simple matter. This is a simple matter of already putting into law what has been in practice, and that is to regularize pension payments to older people in the country.

**Mr. Imbert:** “You cyar muzzle me.” You could say what you want.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** It is true he cannot be muzzled. He is uncontrollable. He is undisciplined. The Prime Minister cannot discipline him. So I simply want to warn him, “when you begin to attack the Opposition for being responsible for what foreign powers say and do, you have to be extremely careful at whom you are pointing fingers”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is emanating from that side, and particularly—and not from most Members, but from a minister who does not understand that he is being used, because, very soon I expect that he will be out of office—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Partap:** Yes.

**Mr. B. Panday:** Fired!

**Mr. Partap:** Might be this evening.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:**—very soon—that he goes from time to time on the public media and attacks people in the country without trying to find solutions or

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMNATH]

Wednesday, January 22, 2003

attempting to find ways of solving a crisis. We are talking here about senior citizens and many speakers before me have gone into the great difficulties that senior citizens have to go through on a daily basis. Every time you look at the news and it deals with the crisis in health—and I do not intend to open a debate on the crisis in health here—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I thank you for that.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:**—you will see that at the Casualty Department of the Port of Spain and San Fernando general hospitals—*[Interruption]* poor people are sitting and waiting for medical attention. You will see old people sitting and waiting for medical attention. The people we are talking about are either those on public assistance—*[Interruption]*—we are talking about people who are disabled, we are—*[Interruption]*

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** He is quite entitled; but I am satisfied with that. “I doh need your help.”

**Mr. B. Panday:** I am so glad you are satisfied.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** I may have to ask for your protection. *[Interruption]*

**Mr. Imbert:** Protection from whom?

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** We are dealing with people who are disabled, we are dealing with people who are poor, we are dealing with people who today are collecting old age pension; yet you have a minister who is oblivious to the needs of this particular segment of the population. I sympathize with my hon. friend who is visiting us today. I want to welcome him and to congratulate him on his maiden speech in this House of Representatives. *[Desk thumping]* I know that he would have liked to have had a debate in which the issues before us would have been dealt with. Notwithstanding his slip with respect to political will, I would say that he has been terribly embarrassed by the intervention of someone who does not know how to mind his business and focus on the responsibilities assigned to him by the Prime Minister.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, these people about whom we are talking, the disabled, the poor, and people who are recipients of old age pension, are today having even greater difficulties, not only difficulties associated with a small allowance given to them or one that is in relation to the affordability of the State, they have a problem receiving health care. When the Minister says today that the Government, the caring Government, compassionate Government and so on, *[Desk thumping]* will be introducing this programme of providing medicines to

the poor, I say to the population of Trinidad and Tobago, once he remains Minister, nothing progressive will take place in the health care system in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

If he cannot, in his own Ministry, attempt to find an amicable solution to a serious problem such as the present crisis in the institution, he will not be able to deliver Aspirins, Glucophage and Daonil and all of those medications that the old people in the country, the recipients of relief and public assistance and old age pension will require. It is a set of empty promises once he is there. He does not have the compassion based on his heritage. He cannot have the compassion. [*Laughter*] He cannot have the passion; he cannot have the concern; he cannot be caring because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, people like him have a history of being uncaring. I am sorry that I have to refer to him so often in this debate but he has brought it upon himself. He must be punished for his deeds and publicly he will be dealt with.

The point I want to make is, you cannot deal with the issue of doctors and simple things like contracts; you decide that you are going to use the forces of the State, the coercive machinery of the State, to injunct people and force them back to work. The Leader of the Opposition is right. We are returning our country to the days of slavery when you tell people that they must go back to work even though they do not have contract to work. I myself do not understand it. Perhaps the Minister of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development might understand what he was involved in.

How, therefore, could we expect that Minister to deliver an efficacious system of drug distribution for the poor and the oppressed in the society? How can we expect a Minister who cannot deal with professionals—you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the problem we have is they have not stopped campaigning. They have not stopped their behaviour of nastiness. They do not even know elections are finished. They do not even know that they are in Government. They continue to campaign. The campaign today is against the doctors because he himself, the Member for Diego Martin East, has gone on record as stating that the doctors are involved in a political campaign against the Government. I have heard him. [*Interruption*] I have heard him. So he has a predisposition. He is predisposed to attacking the doctors in the country because he is of that view.

Lawyers, Mr. Deputy Speaker, are supposed to practise their profession irrespective of what a government might think; but it looks as though we have UNC lawyers in Trinidad, the ones that they on the PNM categorize as UNC, and there are UNC doctors and PNM doctors and PNM lawyers and so forth, and you listen to the noises that are emanating from the wilderness. Soon he shall be

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMNATH]

Wednesday, January 22, 2003

banished into the wilderness because of his inability to manage the health sector in the country. However, I have—[*Interruption*] I am back here. I am real. I am for real. [*Interruption*] Very few people can return as I have returned. [*Desk thumping*] I will publicly state that I am grateful to the leader for the wisdom expressed [*Interruption*] in selecting me.

**Mr. Valley:** Go down on your knees.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** No. The one who has to go down on his knees is the Prime Minister who stands in the Methodist church and says, “I am sorry for having opposed a certain gentleman to become President of the country” when my leader nominated him for the position. He is the one who has to go on his knees. Do you know why? It is because their existence today is based on the favour granted to them by the recipient of that largesse. [*Desk thumping*] They know that. [*Interruption*]

I did not have to go on my knees. I did what I had to do and I stood openly in the country and said that I am prepared to serve the UNC and my voice was listened to. I did not have “to depend on no holder of high office” to put me in government for nine months with \$20 billion to spend to campaign for an election. I could understand [*Desk thumping*] why all of them today have to be eternally grateful. In fact, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I expect that they would have extended the gentleman’s term for another 20 years or make him a holder of that office for life, otherwise they could never have been sitting there and we sitting here. [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Hon. Member, now that you have gone through it, let us get back to where we were, please.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You know, in debates— [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** I hear you.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:**—you unfortunately must reply to some of the statements and the asides coming from that side. So, if he wants to grovel, that is okay. I do not have to tell my friend, the Member for Diego Martin Central, how he referred to his dear leader sitting on his right. I do not have to remind him; but I would not go into that now and I would not go into a church, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and apologize for my misbehaviour, my attack on a distinguished citizen in Trinidad and Tobago; because he has returned—[*Interruption*] It looks as though this is a moment for apologies—but as a Christian you will understand there is something called the resurrection.



So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my friend, the Member for Diego Martin East, did a great injustice to the debate by his irrelevancies and attacks on people who serve this country very well. If he wants to find out how he should conduct himself, he should talk to his own Prime Minister who, on many occasions, has expressed a desire to carry out the people's business in a most dignified manner. However, when you start that type of politicking and you start talking about the things that he spoke about, do not expect that this is—as the Leader of the Opposition will tell you, this is not a bishop's tea party and there are people, like many of us on this side, who are not prepared to have them continue carrying on the campaign of 2001 as if the elections were not completed.

I want to particularly warn him that if he decides that old age pensioners and recipients of public assistance and disabled people must continue to not obtain medical support in the state institutions, if he decides that he is going to continue to fight and to threaten doctors in the country, then the people who are going to suffer are the people about whom we are speaking today, legitimizing the decision of the Government to increase the old age pension to \$1,000.

My friend, the Member for Chaguanas, made a very important point, and that is; when we decided to recommend an increase to \$800, it was based not on seeking to obtain votes from old age pensioners but on the affordability of the State at the time to contribute to that pension, to contribute to that increase. Had they followed the advice of the UNC, today people who have reached 60 years of age would have been the recipient of \$800 a month, assuming the pension had not gone to \$1,000. We would have had a much wider catchment area and we would have impacted in a more meaningful way on a larger section of the community.

**Mr. Manning:** Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank the hon. Member for giving way. I wonder if the hon. Member for Couva South would care to tell us what it would have cost to keep the pensions at \$800 but reduce the qualifying age to 60?

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** My colleague, the Member for St. Joseph, is fully cognizant with the economic data and impact—

**Mr. Manning:** And he will answer that?

**Mr. K. Ramnath:**—and I will request him to provide, during the tea interval, that information to the Prime Minister. He would not have made such a recommendation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, unless, as thorough a man as he is—I have had the opportunity to work with the Member for St. Joseph and I will tell you something. He is not an easy man to convince when it comes to spending money in the manner that they—in the profligate manner that they have demonstrated.

**Dr. Rowley:** Careful, careful, careful! I am coming after you, you know. Be careful!

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** I will welcome—and after you. You will notice I have not said criminally profligate as yet. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we would have attracted a much wider—[*Interruption*]

Let me just tell you something. One in every five persons in this society suffers from the chronic illness of diabetes. [*Interruption*] You ask—he does not know that. He does not take advice from his principal medical officer. One in every five suffers from the chronic illness of diabetes. [*Interruption*] You see, I know that and the Minister does not know it. I know that from data published by his Ministry; but let us not go into that. Let me just say something. Because of that serious problem in the society, many people are having grave difficulties in managing this very serious illness. They require not only medication, which they promised they would deliver, but they also find themselves in situations where they lose their limbs, they lose their sight and they suffer all kinds of serious complications associated with this illness. These are people who would have benefited from the UNC proposal of reduction of the pensionable age to 60 and we would have had in this country a larger number of people who need public support as recipients of old age pension.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** The sitting of this House is now suspended to 5.00 p.m.

**4.30 p.m.:** *Sitting suspended.*

**5.03 p.m.:** *Sitting resumed.*

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Having completed my introductory remarks, I would now focus on the Bill before us. [*Interruption*] No, I was replying to comments made during the course of the debate, to which I am entitled.

Without hesitation, I want to state that I welcome and would always welcome the provision of assistance in one form or another to the less fortunate members of our society, the most vulnerable groups in the society, and, while we are talking about providing an increase, we must also consider that there are other groups of persons in the society who are affected in one way or another by decisions with respect to pensions.

Some time ago I raised the issue and I am still very concerned that we have not addressed the indexing of pension to the cost of living. It is an issue that I feel ought to be discussed. I am not here presenting a case for using any particular

index, but I recall that around 1978, the Member for Tobago East at the time, Mr. A.N.R. Robinson, moved a motion in this Parliament on the subject matter. Members who like to read will find that debate of the former Member for Tobago East, Prime Minister, and now President very instructive in his contributions.

I recall having to look at a large number of persons marching around the roundabout in Pointe-a-Pierre and in front of the administration building of Petrotrin, people who came from Tesoro and Fyzabad who were getting pensions less than what the State was paying to old age pensioners. The reason for that is understandable, they were being paid in accordance with a pension plan. I am reminded by my hon. friend, the Member for St. Joseph, that it exists today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not drawing you into the debate, but I know you are retired, and I know that you received a pension from a particular company, which we know very well. If one were to look at what salaries were when people like you retired, in the year you retired, compared to what salaries are now in the same industry and use the existing formula based on the laws of Trinidad and Tobago, one will see the considerable disadvantage experienced by those who are alive and collecting pensions with respect to others. I imagine if I retire tomorrow—which is a possibility depending on the benefits offered to me—in ten years time, I will find out that I may also have to demonstrate asking for the pension plan to be lenient to recipients. This is the same position in which old age pensioners find themselves and that is why we are here today.

We have recognized that this is not a gift we are giving them; this is what they have worked for. They have contributed their lives to this society, worked in the country, created the wealth that we manage today, and we, in a kind of ad hoc manner, are saying that we owe them something. We must put an end to this ad hoc way as honourable as the intention of the Government might be. We should put some kind of structure to pensions, and it is about time we look at the issue in the country.

Apart from the Prime Ministers, one has to serve four terms in this House—I am in my fourth term—to get three-quarters of one's salary. Four terms, not continuous, in order for you to get three-quarters of your salary. If you are a back-bencher in the Government, or you are in the Opposition, you will end up with a grand pension of \$6,000 a month after 20 years.

After serving for three consecutive terms and having undergone a 10 per cent cut in my pay by a former government, I want back my money. I am going to write the Government asking that I get a rebate because they cut my pay by 10 per

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMNATH]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

cent. The point I want to make is when I demitted office, at the end of 1991; I was working for the grand salary before tax of \$2,970. The salary of a Member of Parliament at that time was \$3,300 per month, and then there was a cut. So my highest salary on which pension is calculated would have been \$2,970.

**Mr. Manning:** Are you suggesting that you are now prepared to support a salary increase for Members of Parliament? Is that what you are saying?

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, unhesitatingly.

**Hon. Members:** Ohhhhh!

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** I speak here according to my conscience irrespective of what my colleagues would like. *[Laughter]* This is a bipartisan issue.

I am told that there is another report of the Salaries Review Commission. I am also told that the Prime Minister is going to get a handsome increase. Do you know what I cannot understand? The Chief Executive of Petrotrin gets over \$50,000 a month salary. *[Interruption]* I want to remind the Member for Diego Martin East that I am now in a very serious mode. That does not include perquisites you know. The mansion repaired at considerable cost to myself when I held a certain office is far better than the house in which the Prime Minister lives. The security is far more beefed up than what the Prime Minister enjoys, transport—

**Mr. Manning:** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank the hon. Member for giving way again. Is he suggesting that the Prime Minister should live in a different house?

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** I have not had the good fortune of visiting that particular home on numerous occasions, but I am simply drawing an example and I do not want to be facetious.

The motor cars, foreign travel—when you look at what Ministers—you see the problem with Ministers is they are very shy and they do not like to talk about the predicament they find themselves in with respect to supporting themselves and their families. By no means is it an easy job and, as I was saying a few minutes ago, I was called to be part of a committee twice and I expect when we have another committee on energy I might be called four times a month to serve without any remuneration, at least as yet. But as a back-bencher or Member of the Opposition we work almost full-time, because one has to do research in these matters.

I do not want to go that way with the debate. I was on the subject of how pensions are calculated. So the Prime Minister gets his full salary—and one understands that—even if he serves one day in office.

**Hon. Member:** Full pension.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** He gets his full salary as pension, not full pension. Full pension is his full salary whether he serves one day or not and I have no difficulty with that. The gratuity is so small, it is 10 per cent of one's total income. In fact, the gratuity owed to me at the end of 1991 was so small that I refused to come to Port of Spain for years to collect it. I have never collected my gratuity. I was entitled to gratuity at the end of 1991 and after 15 years, do you know what they offered to pay me? It was \$50,000 and I said I do not need it. I have not collected it.

**Dr. Rowley:** You do not need that.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** I think I was angry. Or I do not know if I had anticipated my return and, therefore, the process continues. The point is when one calculates pension based on one's highest annual salary and look at the salaries of Ministers one will see that if a Minister gets 50 per cent of his/her salary after all the years served, 15 or more, he/she is expected to live on that for the rest of his life because he gave up his professional career.

Some years ago, I had a conversation with the Member for Diego Martin Central. I know he went to Mac Master, he was in private business, he was a financial consultant and then he gave it up to work for \$18,000 and that is after a lot of debate as to whether it should be accepted or not accepted. *[Interruption]* If I were around, it would have been a different matter because I know what I am worth and I do not think that people are paid properly and, therefore, pensions are not fair based on the calculations.

So if you are serving as a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) which all Ministers are in their respective ministries, and the Prime Minister can be seen as the Executive Chairman with a series of CEO's, because the ministries are very large—the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries is a god example, and so is the Ministry of Works and Transport. I am glad they moved the Member for Diego Martin East from there because he made a total mess of it. Ministry of Health, that is a bad example. *[Laughter]* But as CEO's, Ministers, not to mention the position of Speaker and Deputy Speaker which I feel the Salaries Review Commission need to wake up and re-examine because you are not allowed to work outside as Speaker. You could probably do something in your spare time, but cannot go to court and so forth. All I am saying is that there is enough justification for us to look at pensions in the country.

The Member for Diego Martin Central, the Minister in the Ministry of Finance, knows what I am talking about. I heard him talking about what happened

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMNATH]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

at BWIA where moneys from the fund were made available to retiring workers. These plans are very badly invested particularly those plans where the trustees also do the investing. One good example of a deviation to that is Trinidad and Tobago Electricity Commission (T&TEC) where the management committee was not the trustee so they were able to invest their moneys in such a manner that the returns were high enough.

Where trustees invest their money in what might be considered as very safe havens, the plans do not generate enough, but in any event the plans have so much money in them that people like you and I, Mr. Deputy Speaker, have not benefited in the contributions that we have made in our life-long work in the oil industry. I do not know what the banks pay. In fact, the best example of how we are badly treated with respect to pension is this august body that is assembled here today.

While these plans are overflowing with a lot of money we are not paying more because we have to modernize them and I do not know the answer. I think the experts—the Minister of Finance knows what has to be done and the former Minister of Finance knows what has to be done.

I will give you an example of a very pernicious doctrine in the country that occurred while we were in office, but it seems to me that it transcends party politics and allows me to pay tax on my contribution to the fund. My contribution to the fund is taxed above \$12,000 a year. That is the only tax benefit I get, \$12,000, but I pay over twice that amount in contributions to the plan. So I pay tax on money going into the plan, and when I get my pension I have to pay tax on that as well. That is unfair because I am being taxed twice. IRAs in the United States of America—I do not know if I am correct—regardless of the amount you contribute, once it is contributed to retirement annuities you do not pay tax on that money. When you get your benefits you are taxed because like anybody else you must pay income tax.

We have found ourselves in a situation because of the \$12,000 limit on pension contributions that we can claim. Many of us are paying way beyond that and, therefore, paying taxes on both our contributions.

The other issue is the maximum of two-thirds of your annual salary as the maximum pension you can get. I am sure that must be the most archaic antiquated, antediluvian piece of law that we have on the statute books in the country. So the entire system of pensions needs to be reviewed because we want to encourage—I remember one of the government economists talking about saving rate. We cannot achieve 2020 vision, we cannot achieve first-world status and the vision of 2020 if we do not increase our savings worth, and creating a disincentive—

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** The speaking time of the hon. Member has expired.

*Motion made,* That the hon. Member's speaking time be extended by 30 minutes. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am really humbled by the graciousness of the Member for Diego Martin East.

As I was saying, this is not the occasion to present any formula because it has to be researched. I am simply suggesting that we focus our attention on the issue of pensions as it relates to improving the savings rate in this country. We found ourselves in a situation where we institutionalized old age pension—other countries have done so—merely because we were trying to look after the most vulnerable group in the society. We have to do that, it is a mandate that we have, but we would like to encourage as many people to become members of a contributory plan in their early years so that they could benefit in a more substantial way when they retire.

My suggestion is that in examining what we do with pensions in the future, we should be looking at the benefits of increasing our savings rate in the country. I had to drop out—and I like to speak about myself because I do not want to be accused of misinformation. At one time when the NAR was in office—well what was left of the NAR—the contribution to pension plans, the tax allowances were much higher than the \$12,000 so many people joined private pension plans. When that position was removed and the \$12,000 was introduced, people had to drop out of these plans because they had to put tax money into the plans. I went through that because I wanted to contribute to pensions so that when I retire I could continue to enjoy my rather rudimentary lifestyle, not really one that certain people are known to enjoy in the country. I feel that we need to take a serious look at encouraging people once again to invest their money in long-term investment portfolios such as pension plans, and I strongly recommend that.

One must have—not the political will—but the will to start in these things, you must have the will to stand and say we are not treating ourselves very well, that we are afraid of some journalist who will put us on the front page when we say that we are underpaid and overworked. It is about time that we start here, and I am quite sure when we start here we will articulate to the wider community that we are going to look at these plans as they affect the wider public because we are all working towards the goal of First-World status. I do not like to use the words 2020 because I might be accused of disloyalty.

*Old Age Pensions Bill*  
[MR. RAMNATH]

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I support the Bill before us. If any party had said \$1,200 or \$1,500 simply to win votes, I think it would have been irresponsible. We were very decent because in our calculation \$800 seemed to have been—the PNM in its own wisdom thought \$1,000, but I know how old people feel. I know how they feel when they hear first of all that the UNC was raising their pension by \$300 to \$400 over a period of time, then subsequently to \$800, and then they heard they were going to get \$1,000. They would have liked it from anybody.

**Mr. Manning:** I thank the hon. Member for giving way. I just want to remind my hon. friend that it was a UNC commitment on which the PNM delivered in taking the pension to \$1,000 per month.

**Mr. K. Ramnath:** I hope that one day we would be in such a fortunate position in this country that we could give them another major raise. Notwithstanding the promise we have heard from the Minister of Health about the special programme for old age pensioners, the fact of the matter is that a lot of the medication they use might very well be outside of what the Government is prepared to finance.

With these few remarks, I wish to indicate that I think we should not only use this opportunity to support improving the grants of old age pensions, disability, and public assistance but have an overall examination of pensions in the country to see how we can on, one hand, improve the quality of life of people who contribute and retire and, on the other hand, contribute to improving the savings rate in the country.

Thank you.

**The Minister of Social Development (Sen. The Hon. Mustapha Abdul-Hamid):** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I begin my conclusion by thanking all the Members who have made valuable contributions to the debate. I would like to address some of the concerns raised and some I might have.

The hon. Member for Chaguanas began by saying he had a sense of nostalgia. I am sorry he is not here now because I would have liked to advise him that nostalgia, if left unchecked, can lead to paranoia and hysteria. I say so because how else do we explain that he looks across at me and says: “I can go into his ministry.” I suggest to him, and maybe his colleagues can convey the message, that the ministry is now mine. [*Laughter*] He ought not to allow an electoral defeat to so badly paralyze his mind.

One of the major challenges that we are having at our ministry is as a result of the actions that the Member undertook, in that the ministry is very badly



accommodated and that provides a serious challenge to our ability to do a number of things. One is that the morale of the staff is very low; the second thing is that we have a difficulty in adding members to our staff because the conditions are so bad and cramped.

**Dr. Rowley:** Where is it located?

**Sen. The Hon. M. Abdul-Hamid:** We are located in a building on El Socorro Road which everybody knows is not fit for modern office accommodation and that represents the single greatest challenge to the success in the performance of the responsibilities and duties of the Ministry of Social Development and Social Services Delivery Ministry, Office of the Prime Minister.

When we speak of political will, this is not to be taken in a vacuum by itself. To be effective, political will must be combined with political intelligence and when they call upon us to provide policy immediately, what the hon. Member must recognize is, as we had alluded to earlier, we are in the process of ongoing consultation and it is as a result of that, at the end of the consultation we would be able to produce the policy. That is a thorough, comprehensive, and ongoing exercise.

To support that further, the Ministry of Social Development, as distinct from the Ministry in the Office of the Prime Minister Social Services Delivery, is the ministry that is dedicated to research, policy formulation, monitoring and evaluation of social programmes. We are different, and the rationale for the separation is that wherever both function with the same Minister one will find there is a heavy emphasis on delivery and the research and policy formulation aspect of the work is sacrificed. So our Government has had the wisdom to separate the functions so that we have a ministry set under a separate and distinct Minister with the specific responsibilities to research and design policies. In so doing, the national population would be assured that the quality of the product would be far superior.

There is need to make reference to the fact that with regard to the disability grant, at present there is no established, proper, acceptable mechanism to determine the eligibility for providing a disability grant. In circumstances like those, we can see how easy it is for unscrupulous persons—be they Ministers or otherwise—to improperly influence the system.

With regard to the comparison of who did what, there is really very little room for comparison in that it is clear that it is we on this side who invented old age pension, public assistance and things like book grant, and we invented free education too.

*Old Age Pensions Bill*

Wednesday, January 22, 2003

[SEN. THE HON. M. ABDUL-HAMID]

In spite of the accusations of terrorism, I am quite comfortable to say “insahallah” in this Parliament because you know that those accusations are all rooted in an attitude just like the statement about the heritage of the hon. Member for Diego Martin East. It is a statement riddled with prejudice and racism. When you stereotype people on the basis of their names or heritage that is racism. That is what categorizes and defines racism. [*Crosstalk*]

In terms of disabilities and terrorism, if one can connect disability and terrorism, the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan has so badly disabled one of his patients, I have to ask if that in itself is not a form of terrorism.

**Mr. Deputy Speaker:** Please, do not go there.

**Sen. The Hon. M. Abdul-Hamid:** I now address the concerns of the hon. Member for Nariva. In order to improve accessibility, we have produced a handbook on the procedures and requirement for the application of old age pension. That makes clear to all our old age pensioners the requirements and procedures they must fulfill and we have made it very easy for them to access.

The Member also raised a concern on the Community Environmental Protection Enhancement Programme (CEPEP), that the majority of people who work in the programme are PNM supporters. I will put it to him that the majority of people in Trinidad and Tobago are PNM supporters so it is a natural consequence that the majority of people in the CEPEP are going to be PNM supporters. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, these Bills are very simple and straightforward. [*Crosstalk*] I thank all Members who have made constructive criticism, and I beg to move.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

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

*House in committee.*

*Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. Chairman, the amendments that come from the Senate are they incorporated as part of the Bill?

**Mr. Chairman:** They are not amendments. The clauses coming from the Senate are really those that we are considering.

*Old Age Pensions Bill*

*Wednesday, January 22, 2003*

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

*House resumed.*

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

**PUBLIC ASSISTANCE (AMDT. AND VALIDATION) BILL**

**The Minister of Social Development (Sen. The Hon. Mustapha Abdul-Hamid):** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move,

That a Bill to amend the Public Assistance Act, Chap. 32:03 and to validate certain things done thereunder be now read a second time.

*Question proposed.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

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

*House in committee.*

*Clauses 1 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

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

*House resumed.*

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

**ADJOURNMENT**

**The Minister of Trade and Industry and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Kenneth Valley):** Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday, January 24, 2003 at 2.00 p.m.

In moving the adjournment, I once more remind Members that there will be a meeting of the Finance Committee at 1.00 p.m. on that day. It is also Private Members' Day and, therefore, the Chief Whip may wish to inform us on the matter that is to be debated on that day.

**Mr. Ganga Singh (Caroni East):** Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the Order Paper is a Private Members' Motion moved by the hon. Member for Siparia and we will be dealing with it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 5.50 p.m.*