

**THE
PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES
OFFICIAL REPORT
IN THE FIFTH SESSION OF THE ELEVENTH PARLIAMENT OF THE
REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO WHICH OPENED ON
SEPTEMBER 23, 2015**

SESSION 2019—2020

VOLUME

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, January 24, 2020

10.30 A.M.

The House of Representatives having assembled, and it being the thirteenth meeting of the Fifth Session of the Eleventh Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, the Clerk read the following Proclamation:

REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

No. 1 of 2020.

By Her Excellency PAULA MAE-
WEEKES, O.R.T.T., President of the Republic of
Trinidad and Tobago and Commander-in-Chief of
the Armed Forces.

[L.S.]

PAULA MAE-WEEKES

President

A PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS it is provided by subsection (1) of section 67 of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, that each session of Parliament shall be

held at such place within Trinidad and Tobago and shall commence at such time as the President may by Proclamation appoint:

Now, therefore, I, PAULA MAE-WEEKES, President as aforesaid, do hereby appoint the Red House, Port of Spain, Trinidad, as the place at which the Fifth Session of the Eleventh Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago shall continue.

Given under my Hand and the Seal of
the President of the Republic of Trinidad
and Tobago at the Office of the President,
St. Ann's, this 10th day of January, 2020.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Madam Speaker: Hon.Members, the Member for Barataria/San Juan has requested leave of absence from today's sitting. The leave the Member has requested has been granted.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

Madam Speaker: Hon.Members, the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago desires to address all Members of Parliament. This sitting is now suspended.

10.34a.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

10.40 a.m.: *Members of the Senate arrived and took their places in the Chamber.*

11.04 a.m.: *Her Excellency the President, accompanied by the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, arrived in the Chamber.*

*[INVOCATIONS]***PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS**

Her Excellency the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Ms. Paula Mae-Weekes, ORTT, addressed both Houses of Parliament as follows:

Madam President of the Senate, Madam Speaker of the House, hon. Members of Parliament.

Our Constitution provides that there shall be a Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago which shall consist of the President, the Senate, and the House of Representatives, and further, that Parliament may make laws for the peace, order and good governance of Trinidad and Tobago. I am pleased to see that the interpreters of these laws are among our number this morning.

As President, my parliamentary role, though essential, is perhaps the least significant. My power and authority is, by law and convention, limited ultimately to acting on the advice of Cabinet once necessary legal requirements have been satisfied.

Another indication of how circumscribed my role is, is that I am here only by invitation as issued by the Speaker of the House. I thank her for allowing me the honour of addressing you at the Re-Opening of the Red House and return to Parliament to the Red House, a long-awaited return, as this is the first time that Parliament is sitting here since 2011.

I was tempted to speak this morning about national pride but there will be sufficient other occasions for that. In determining the subject of today's address I thought it a good idea to look at addresses delivered by my predecessors in office on similar occasions. I also reviewed addresses by my counterparts in other jurisdictions with a similar colonial heritage where the head of state is not the head of government. By and large, in those countries, the head of state's address to

Parliament follows the practice employed by Her Majesty the Queen who uses the occasion to outline government's legislative agenda for the parliamentary year.

Our republican model has not followed suit, at least not with the last four presidents, and themes selected by our heads of state have been as different as were the presidents themselves. I discerned no common thread and therefore concluded that subject only to propriety and relevance I am afforded licence to speak as I see fit.

This morning I assumed the role of emissary, bringing to Parliament a message from the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who have entrusted to us the solemn responsibility to make such laws that would enable them to live secure, productive, gratifying and peaceful lives.

I receive correspondence from members of the public on a daily basis complaining bitterly in essence that existing laws do not address their serious concerns and that some laws appear to benefit narrow sectarian interests rather than the interest of all. I suspect that citizens write me because they harbour the mistaken belief that I have the jurisdiction to take action directly and/or to issue orders to the powers that be; we assembled know better. And so I deliver their message, a message which they feel that neither Government nor Opposition is hearing, or if hearing, ignoring, and the message is as simple as it is poignant; they are hurting.

While Parliament and other leaders of the country are dabbling in semantics about whether we are a failed state or in a crime crisis our citizens are being murdered at an alarming rate. They lack opportunities for employment or are losing their jobs. Food prices are spirally beyond the reach of many and more and more of our children are falling into the "at-risk" category. Citizens are entitled to look to you for and demand of you solutions to alleviate their pain. They want you

to work together for their good.

Even the most desperate understand the nature of politics and that some degree of toeing the party line, posturing, old talk and picing come with the territory, but at the end of the day fidelity to the people, our vulnerable women, our defenceless children, our angry young men must be the primary and paramount concern of parliamentarians.

I suspect that the grand and august ambiance of parliamentary Chambers, and this one is no exception, is meant to reflect the sacredness and solemn duty which all but a few of you actively sought. Citizens cannot be faulted if they expect their business to be handled with complementary dignity and decorum and with a degree of urgency.

Allow me to digress briefly. The Independent Bench, the nine impartial representatives of the people, without political agenda, are essential and valuable Members of Parliament. By their probing, testing and questioning of proposed legislation, they, devoid of partisan interests, bring to the table a necessary, even-handed approach. I take this opportunity to thank them for their service to country. The important and increasing demands on them dictate that if they are to function effectively they be appropriately accommodated and equipped to perform their roles.

In 22 months in office I have assented to 46 Acts of Parliament, issued 23 proclamations, but the “man in de street”, the executive in the office, and the public servant in the Ministry, would be hard-pressed to find, far less measure, any improvement in their day-to-day circumstances. Of course not every Act can yield immediate or short-term results but there needs to be legislation that addresses and ameliorates promptly critical and pressing issues confronting our population.

The job of a parliamentarian can be a thankless one. It is not for the faint-

hearted or thin-skinned. Even when legislation has been brought to the floor and thoroughly debated citizens may still question its relevance, effect and impact on their daily lives and welfare. Legislation then is ineffective and unfruitful if it does not redound to the benefit of the citizens.

I have repeated ad nauseam that citizens have an onus on them which they can neither deny nor shirk to contribute to their overall well-being. They have their role to play in making this country one of which they can be proud, but they are dependent on those of us assembled here to lead the way, to provide avenues and opportunities for improvement and to model desirable conduct.

Parliament sets the tone for the average "man in de street". If you are seen to treat each other with respect, courtesy and good humour, there can be a trickle-down effect and eventual cascade, but when acrimony, contempt and divisiveness is the example you set, you cannot be surprised when those attitudes and behaviours are replicated on the nation's roads, in our schools and homes and on social media.

Awesome power resides in these Chambers and citizens are entitled to expect us to work together to give them, not only their constitutional due but also the blueprint for national conduct. Law and order, truth and justice, morality and decency; these are the values which should be associated with our Parliament.

A well-established columnist, in an article shortly after my inauguration, commented that I reminded him of a stern long-time creole auntie/"tantie". I accept that as a badge of honour since in my experience auntie/"tanties" are usually proponents of sober thinking, discipline, good behaviour and deep reflection. They often tell us what we already know and use opportune moments such as these to give us timely reminders just in case we forgot.

I hope and pray that as I address this Parliament, holding myself out as a

voice for citizens, it is not a voice crying in the wilderness.

11.19 a.m.: *Her Excellency the President, accompanied by the President of the Senate and the Speaker of the House of Representatives, left the Chamber.*

11.40 a.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

PAPER LAID

Address by Her Excellency the President on the occasion of the Re-Opening of the Red House. [*The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]

To be printed as a House Paper.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Social Development and Family Services (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly once again, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there being no other business, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Monday the 27th day of January, 2020, at 1.30 p.m. Madam Speaker, may I indicate that at that time we will be doing the Finance Bill. Madam Speaker, may I be allowed to remind Members that prior to that at 10 o'clock we will have Standing Finance Committee. Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 11.42 a.m.