

**SENATE**

*Wednesday, September 25, 2019*

The Senate met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]



**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, I have granted leave of absence to Sen. The Hon. Dennis Moses and Sen. Wade Mark, both of whom are out of the country, and Sen. Foster Cummings who is ill.

**SENATORS' APPOINTMENT**

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, I have received the following correspondence from Her Excellency the President, Paula-Mae Weekes, ORTT:

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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.

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes  
President.

TO: MR. NDALE YOUNG

WHEREAS Senator the Honourable Dennis Moses is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, acting in accordance with the advice of the Prime Minister, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do hereby appoint you, NDALE YOUNG, to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2019 and continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of the said Senator the Honourable Dennis Moses.

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 23<sup>rd</sup> day of September, 2019."

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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.

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes

President.

TO: MR. AGUSTUS THOMAS

WHEREAS Senator Foster Cummings is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of illness:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, acting in accordance with the advice of the acting Prime Minister, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(b) and section 44(4)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, do

**UNREVISED**

hereby appoint you, AGUSTUS THOMAS to be temporarily a member of the Senate, with effect from 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2019 and continuing during the absence of Senator Foster Cummings by reason of illness.

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 25<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2019."

“THE CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO

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.

/s/ Paula-Mae Weekes  
President.

TO: MR. RISHI TRIPATHI

WHEREAS Senator Wade Mark is incapable of performing his duties as a Senator by reason of his absence from Trinidad and Tobago:

NOW, THEREFORE, I, PAULA-MAE WEEKES, President as aforesaid, in exercise of the power vested in me by section 44(1)(a) and section 44(4)(b) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, acting in accordance with the advice of the Leader of the Opposition, do hereby appoint you, RISHI TRIPATHI, to be a member of the Senate temporarily, with effect from the 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2019 and

**UNREVISED**

continuing during the absence from Trinidad and Tobago of Senator Wade Mark.

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 25<sup>th</sup> day of September, 2019."

### **AFFIRMATION OF ALLEGIANCE**

*Senator Ndale Young took and subscribed the Affirmation of Allegiance as required by law.*

### **OATH OF ALLEGIANCE**

*Senators Augustus Thomas and Rishi Tripathi took and subscribed the Oath of Allegiance as required by law.*

### **CONDOLENCES**

#### **(DR. LINDA BABOOLAL)**

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, as you are all aware, Dr. Linda Baboolal, former President of the Senate, passed away on Thursday, September 12, 2019. I now invite you to offer tributes.

**The Minister of Communications (Sen. The Hon. Donna Cox):** Thank you, Madam President. I rise today to engage in one of the tasks in which few, if any of us, as parliamentarians, take any delight, if only because it forces us to confront the reality of our own mortality. However, when I reflect on the life of Dr. Linda Baboolal, I know that she, who would have comforted many through loss and grief, would expect no less from us. Indeed, if there was anything she taught us, it would have been to share the grief of those who mourn and to rejoice with those who are joyful.

Madam President, you sit today in the shadow of Dr. Linda Baboolal who was the first female to have served as President of the Senate of Trinidad and Tobago, and she did so at a time in this country's development when governance was on trial.

Senators would recall that she was first elected to the Seventh Parliament and served from April to October 2002, when the failure to elect a Speaker in the other place forced another general election. During that time, there were no Opposition Senators and it therefore required the President to exercise all her political acumen so as to ensure that the proceedings met all the criteria for constitutional and public propriety.

Dr. Baboolal was re-elected to serve as President of the Senate in the Eighth Parliament from October 2002 until its dissolution in September 2007. In this period she was called upon to exercise the proverbial patience of Job in a sharply divided Senate. It was only her indomitable spirit and unshakable faith that allowed her to navigate the difficult waters of that tempestuous period. Her class, her grace, her sharp wit and firm rulings brought back in line many a rambunctious speaker.

Her exchanges with the Leader of the Opposition's Senate Bench have now achieved viral fame, but at no time can anyone recall her compromising the high standards she had set for herself and the Senate in pursuit of order, decorum and fairness.

By virtue of her position as Senate President, Dr. Baboolal also served this country in its highest office as Acting President of the Republic. In both offices she brought a measure of dignity, balance and emotional intelligence that can only come from a woman of worth. Dr. Baboolal enjoyed her period of service, not only in this august Chamber but also in the other place, where she served as the

Member of Parliament for Barataria/San Juan, as well as in the ministerial portfolios of Consumer Affairs and Social Services, Health, and Social Development. Today her name is remembered with due deference and utmost respect in those communities she served, if only because she treated her constituents with the same measure of respect she revered for this honourable House.

She was a personal friend of mine who offered advice, solicited and unsolicited.

Madam President, you, me, and all female Senators today owe a debt of gratitude to Dr. Baboolal, for we not only shelter in her shadow, but we stand on the shoulders of a giant woman whose contribution to country was as selfless as it was exemplary and as meaningful as it is worthy of emulation.

Today, on behalf of a grateful nation and a grieving party, I offer my deepest and sincerest condolences to her husband, Dr. Michael Baboolal, her children, her grandchildren, and extended family, and let us remember Dr. Baboolal as we continue to shape our tomorrow by our actions today. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Khadijah Ameen:** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, I rise to add to the numerous tributes that have come for former President of the Senate and Member of Parliament, Dr. Linda Baboolal. It is with considerable sadness that I embrace this opportunity to say a few words and to give solace to the Baboolal family and equally to those who feel a profound sense of loss by the transition of a dear friend and colleague into the eternal.

Fellow MPs, former and present, reflect on their time served together in office, in politics, and in service to community. Many have identified Dr.

Baboolal's ability to find a solution to the most intricate of problems and to earn the respect from both sides of the political divide.

Dr. Baboolal was not my contemporary, so I have no such reflections to share. But, Madam President, my first encounter with this giant of a woman was at St. George's College, but as a Form One student, where Dr. Baboolal, a past pupil of that school, was invited as the chief guest to be honoured and to give the feature address which would inspire new Georgians like myself to aim for the stars. St. George's College was not my first choice, and I was a very unhappy Form One. When Dr. Baboolal spoke to us as a former pupil and spoke to us as Form Ones, the inspiration that she lit within myself and other first-time Georgians is something that has stayed with us for all of our lives and I recently had the opportunity to share with some classmates that memory of Dr. Baboolal giving that speech to us at St. George's College.

For us as young women who choose to enter the field of politics, Dr. Linda Baboolal is one of the women pioneers who we can look up to as first female President of the Senate, along with our first female Prime Minister, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, and our first lady President, present President, Paula-Mae Weekes. Her inspiration will live on. May her soul rest in peace. May her memory continue to live within those who worked with her and those who were inspired by her.

On behalf of the United National Congress and the very young Senate Bench today, I want to say peace and blessings to the family of Dr. Linda Baboolal.  
*[Desk thumping]*

**Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy:** Thank you, Madam President. I have the honour of bringing tribute on behalf of the Independent Bench about the late Dr. Linda Baboolal. I also did not know her, but I had the opportunity of speaking to a very

good friend of hers, another physician, who started her internship with her at one of the hospitals in Trinidad. She said Dr. Baboolal was a woman of many parts. She described this intern who already had her five children. "Could you imagine", she said to me, "a young doctor with five children, a mother, a wife, a budding community leader". And so many parts that she had, that she could not understand how she could have done it. She said that she was just having her first child and it was Dr. Baboolal who came and helped her to nurture that child appropriately, even teaching her how to cook. She had very good memories of this young doctor.

From what I understand of Dr. Baboolal, she had an excellent relationship with her patients. She was not interested in the business of medicine, but interested in patient care. And the story is told that on one occasion, at the end of the day, her income was a duck that was given to her by one of her patients. She was a knowledgeable family practitioner and that knowledge also included her referring her patients appropriately when they needed specialist care. It is clear to me that Dr. Baboolal had excellent organizing skills and one who understood how to manage work/life balance.

I also spoke with an independent Senator who was in this Chamber when Dr. Baboolal was President, and that Senator remembered some of the things that had already been said both here today and the tributes that were made to her in the newspapers. That Independent Senator said she was very gentle, humble, respectful of all people, and she said she never shouted, she never had to raise her voice but exerted quiet influence from the Chair and was very respected by the Members, as was said before.

She also had an interest in people development and therefore, she had an opportunity to allow the then Vice-President of the Senate to have the experience of acting in the Chair on several occasions. Being from Tobago, I understood that



Dr. Baboolal, whenever she acted as President, visited Tobago often and she loved Tobago.

In summary, this daughter of the soil was a humble, caring person who has left a great legacy for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. May her soul rest in peace. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, I too wish to express my sadness at the passing of Dr. Linda Baboolal. We have heard all of her public accomplishments rehearsed today, and from what we have heard and from what we know instinctively, it is clear that during her life, Linda Baboolal lived by the tenets of hard work and determination.

A female doctor, elected Member of Parliament, Minister of Government, chairman of a political party, President of the Senate, and by extension, Acting President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Each of these accomplishments on its own is a success story. But put them all together and hers becomes an extraordinarily powerful life story. But what, one might ask, is the most important part of that story? What was the feature in the life of Linda Baboolal that lay at the centre of all that she was and of all that she accomplished?

For me, I discovered the answer to that question when I visited her home recently. What I discovered then is that what Linda Baboolal thought was the greatest accomplishment of her life was the love and togetherness of her family. The walls of her home are literally covered with pictures of her beautiful family: her husband, children, grandchildren and her siblings. And what stood out to me is that her family pictures outnumbered by multiples any photographs of her in public life.

All in public life, but more so women, know of the sacrifices that are made in order to serve, especially the sacrifices that are made where family life is

concerned. Linda Baboolal must have made her fair share of such sacrifices but what emerged to me, from looking at those pictures on the walls of her home that evening, is that Linda Baboolal somehow found the means to suffer the demands of those sacrifices without sacrificing the demands of family. Somehow she found that elusive balance and excelled at both. So, on behalf of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago and more so of the Senate and its members of staff, I express my sympathy to her husband, children, grandchildren and siblings. Her accomplishment as a woman have helped other women to aspire to positions in public life and she has made a positive difference to many lives in Trinidad and Tobago. We are all grateful for her service and we are even more grateful to her family for having loaned her to us in public service for as long as they did. She is, as we know, as proud of you as you are of her. May her soul rest in peace. [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Senators, I now ask that we stand and observe a minute of silence.

*The Senate stood.*

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, I now instruct the Clerk to convey to her family the sentiments that have been expressed today.

### **GOVERNMENT SAVINGS BONDS (AMDT.) BILL, 2019**

Bill to amend the to amend the Government Savings Bonds Act, Chap. 71:41, brought from the House of Representatives [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

*Motion made:* That the next stage be taken later in the proceedings. [*Sen. The Hon. A. West*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

**PAPERS LAID**

**UNREVISED**

1. Report of the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago (CBTT) with respect to the Progress of the Proposals to Restructure CLICO, BAT and CIB for the quarter ended June 30, 2019. [*The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West)*] Annual Audited Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Free Zones Company Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2018. [*Sen. The Hon. A. West*]
2. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Public Administration to the Twenty-Second Report of the Public Accounts Committee on the Examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial years 2010 to 2016. [*Sen. The Hon. A. West*]
3. Annual Administrative Report of the Ministry of Community Development, Culture and the Arts for the fiscal year 2016/2017. [*The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan)*]
4. Consolidated Financial Statements of the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2008. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
5. Companies (Amendment) Regulations, 2019. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]

## **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS (ENTERPRISES) COMMITTEE REPORTS**

### **(Presentation)**

**Sen. Amrita Deonarine:** Thank you Madam President. Madam President, I have the honour to present the following reports as listed on the Order Paper in my name:

### **Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited**

Twentieth Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee, Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament on an examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial Statements of the Palo Seco Agricultural Enterprises Limited for the financial years 2012 to 2017.

**Trinidad and Tobago Creative Industries Company Limited (CreativeTT)**

Twenty-Second Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee, Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament on an examination of the Audited Accounts, Balance Sheets and other Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Creative Industries Company Limited (CreativeTT) for the financial years 2014 and 2015.

**InvesTT Limited**

Twenty-Third Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee, Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament on an examination of the Audited Financial Statements of InvesTT Limited for the years 2014 to 2017.

Thank you, Madam President.

**2.15 p.m.**

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS**

**(Presentation)**

**The Minister of Agriculture Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Madam President, I have the honour to present the following reports as listed on the Supplemental Order Paper in my name:

**Cybercrime Bill, 2017**

Report of the Joint Select Committee, appointed to consider and report on the Cybercrime Bill, 2017 in the Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament.

**UNREVISED**

**Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters Bill, 2018,  
Tax Information Exchange Agreements Bill, 2018 and  
Income Tax (Amdt.) Bill, 2019**

Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters Bill, 2018, the Tax Information Exchange Agreements Bill, 2018 and the Income Tax (Amdt.) Bill, 2019 in the Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament.

**Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2019**

Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2019 in the Fourth Session, (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament.

**SPECIAL SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT**

**(Presentation)**

**Evidence (Amdt.) Bill, 2019**

Report of the Special Select Committee established to consider and report on the Evidence (Amdt.) Bill, 2019 in the Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament.

**JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORTS**

**Public Administration and Appropriations (Presentation)**

**Statements of Expenditure 2018/2019**

Eighteenth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee, Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament on the examination of the Statements of Expenditure for the first, second and third quarters as well as the month ending July 31<sup>st</sup> of the financial year

2018/2019, with respect to Recurrent Expenditure, Development Programme, Consolidated Fund and Infrastructure and Development Fund.

**Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill, 2016**

**The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West):** Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Supplemental Order Paper in my name:

Report of the Joint Select Committee, appointed to consider and report on the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Bill, 2016 in the Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament.

**Constitution (Amdt.) (Tobago Self-Government) Bill, 2018**

**Sen. Nigel De Freitas:** Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Supplemental Order Paper in my name:

Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Constitution (Amdt.) (Tobago Self-Government) Bill, 2018 in the Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament

**National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago Bill, 2018**

**The Minister of Trade and Industry (Sen. The Hon. Paula Gopee-Scoon):** Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Supplemental Order Paper in my name:

Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the National Statistical Institute of Trinidad and Tobago Bill, 2018 in the Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament

**Private Security Industry Bill, 2019**

**Sen. Paul Richards:** Madam President, good afternoon colleagues. Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Supplemental Order Paper in my name:

Report of the Joint Select Committee appointed to consider and report on the Private Security Industry Bill, 2019 in the Fourth Session (2018/2019), Eleventh Parliament.

## **PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE REPORTS**

### **(Presentation)**

**Sen. Taharqa Obika:** Madam President, I have the honour to present the following reports as listed on the Supplemental Order Paper in my name:

#### **National Lotteries Control Board**

Twenty-Fifth Report of the Public Accounts Committee, Fourth Session (2018/2019) Eleventh Parliament on the examination of the Audited Financial Statements of the National Lotteries Control Board (NLCB) for the years 2008 to 2012 and the NLCB's expenditure and internal controls during this period.

#### **National Carnival Commission of Trinidad and Tobago**

Twenty-Seventh Report of the Public Accounts Committee Fourth Session (2018/2019) Eleventh Parliament on the examination of the Expenditure and Internal Controls of the National Carnival Commission of Trinidad and Tobago (NCC) for the years 2010 to 2018.

## **ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan):** Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, there are seven questions for on notice. The Government is pleased to announce it will be

answering five out of those seven. We ask for a deferral of two weeks, for question number 207 and question number 209. Thank you.

*The following questions stood on the Order Paper in the name of Sen. Wade Mark:*

**Dilapidation of Lion's House**

**(Measures taken to preserve)**

**207.** In light of the advanced state of dilapidation of Lion's House which is listed by the National Trust as a heritage site, can the hon. Minister of Community Development, Culture and the Arts state what measures are being taken to preserve this historical building?

**Construction of Cedros Fire Station**

**(Request by Community)**

**209.** In light of a number of recent fires in the Cedros community and the petition signed by residents requesting the construction of a fire station, can the hon. Minister of National Security state whether the Government intends to facilitate said request?

*Questions, by leave, deferred.*

**UN Report on Desalination Plants**

**(Measures Taken re Environmental Threats)**

**208. Sen. Khadijah Ameen** on behalf of Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:

Having regard to a recently published UN Report which revealed that desalination plants are 'pumping far more salt-laden brine into the sea' thereby posing a major risk to ocean life and the marine ecosystem, can the Minister state what measures are being taken to address threats to this country's environment?



**The Minister of Public Utilities (Sen. The Hon. Robert Le Hunte):** Madam President, the establishment, modification, expansion, decommissioning, or abandonment of a desalination plant fall under the Certificate of Environmental Clearance, Order of the Environmental Act, Chap. 35:05, which came into effect in 2001. For any of these activities related to a desalination plant and environmental impact assessment may be required depending on location and capacity, in order to obtain the CEC.

The CEC is issued with conditions to mitigate negative impact on the environment in the marine environment. There are currently three operational desalination plants in Trinidad and Tobago. They are: The Seven Seas at Point Fortin, the Bechtel at Galeota, and the Desalcott at Pointe-a-Pierre, Seven Seas. The EMA has issued a CEC 2950/2013 to the Water and Sewage Authority operated by Seven Seas for the establishment of a 4.6 imperial gallons of water package per day for the desalination plant at Petrotrin Trinmar operations at Point Fortin. The Point Fortin desalination plant was put into operations in 2013, and is owned and operated by Seven Seas Water Unlimited.

Details models were performed which demonstrated that both the design and siting of the outflow and associated diffusers does not present any significant environmental impact. This information provided to the EMA had informed the granting of the CEC by the EMA.

Further, the water quality monitoring is performed and reported to the EMA for their independent assessment in accordance with the CEC approval, the Bechtel desalination plant. The EMA has issued a CEC 5148 of 2017 to Bechtel International for the installation and operation of a temporary sea water desalinating system at Galeota Point terminal located at Isthmus Road, Guayaguayare. This plant does not discharge into the marine environment.

Desalcott: the Point Lisas desalination plant was constructed by the Desalination Company of Trinidad and Tobago, Desalcott, over a period 1919 to 2002. The Desalcott desalination plant was established prior to the CECs legislation process. The legal requirement for the CEC cannot be applied retroactively. Prior to the CECs legislation process, the Town and Country Planning was responsible for the approval of the Desalcott desalination plant.

This approval process required an environmental impact assessment to be conducted to inform this decision. The EMA took part of the review process of the EIA. Subsequently, in 2011 Desalcott sought the approval of the EMA to expand its plant from 24 to 40 million imperial gallons of water per day. The EMA determined that no CEC was required as the applicant Desalcott already had approval for 40 million gallon plant which was approved by Town and Country Planning Division, and had been subject to an EIA.

Consistent with the approval of the Town and Country Planning Division and in keeping with the EIA, parameters were set for the brine discharge and other items. Desalcott produces quarterly reports to Plipdeco showing third party independent laboratory and other testing to confirm compliance. It should be noted that these are small scale facilities housed in retrofitted shipping containers with a relatively typically small output of 25m<sup>3</sup> a day. Only one, Seven Seas, discharges into the marine environment. The EMA monitors compliance with the CEC terms and conditions through review of a monitoring report as well as the conduct of site visits periodically. To date there has been no—

**Madam Speaker:** Minister, Minister, your time is up.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** Thank you.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, based on the Minister's answer that the CECs were granted at a time before, and

that the EMA continues to monitor, and that reports are made. Can the Minister then indicate to us when was the last report done by the EMA in terms of the monitoring of these desalination plants please?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** Madam President, as I said, under the EMA is in the process in keeping with the Water Pollution Rules—the new Water Pollution Rules that are in place, the EMA is in the process of conducting a baseline survey as it is now to get certain information and for the revision of those rules. Those rules were supposed to be revised and the last date for comments on those rules was April 2019, and it is expected that the rules will be promulgated by November 2019.

The EMA as I said, has commissioned a baseline ecological risk assessment study along the southwest coast between Pointe-a-Pierre and Icacos. This 18-month study will identify the marine habits and species that are at risk for land and sea-based pollution including discharge from the desalination plant. So, when that particular work is finished which is presently underway, the baseline information would be finished, and the necessary checks would be done against a baseline survey.

But I want to make the point as I said before, that under the present arrangements the CEC that was done—the CEC was in place for in keeping with the recommendations of the Seven Seas. At the time when the desalination plant was put down there was no need for a CEC to be put in place.

**Sen. Ameen:** Follow up question, Madam President. Can the Minister indicate when the EMA survey he mentioned will be completed?

**Madam Speaker:** I think that was contained in the answer. The body of the answer given by the Minister.

**Sen. Ameen:** He said it was ongoing, he did not give a completion date.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** Madam President, you are correct. I did say that this 18-month study will identify the marine habits and species that are at risk from a land and sea-based pollution, including discharge from the desalination plants, and it started in April.

**Sen. Ameen:** Thank you, Madam President. Just a follow up, through you, Madam President, the present standards by the EMA would have been before the study that was mentioned in the question. The study by the United Nations that indicate the danger in water—

**Madam President:** Sen. Ameen, question please.

**Sen. Ameen:**—that indicate the danger in water with more than 5 per cent salt content and toxins such as chlorine and copper. Can the—are there mechanisms in place for the Ministry of Public Utilities to be guided by the recommendations of these studies, outside of the EMA provisions only?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** Madam President, as I said earlier, all the requirements that the desalination plant has to have, they are presently complying with it. Under the town and country approval that was given, Desalcott produces quarterly reports for Plipdeco showing third party independent laboratory and other testings to confirm compliance. So, they are presently doing and they are in compliance with what it is within their approval. There are other tests that are being put in place and other things that are being put in place via the waste water rules, and these things are going to be guided from the assessment that is being put in place now.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, having regard to the Minister's answer that the EMA is yet to confirm the findings of the UN report, and the irreversible—

**Madam President:** Question please, question please.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Sorry, Madam President, is the Minister or the Ministry going to take any urgent steps having regard to the damage that can be done will be irreversible? What urgent steps will the Ministry take to confirm the findings of the report?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** Madam President, first to begin, we cannot be jumping to conclusions, all right. There is a process that needs to be done and a process that is being followed. The Environmental Management Authority in 2018, as I said, they commissioned their baseline ecological risk assessment study and that is ongoing.

The Environmental Management Authority has also instituted the required amendments to the waste rules and these have gone out for public comments, and the necessary amendments would be done. Until such time, those things are put in place then that is what gives you the legislative framework to be able to act outside of the approvals that are presently in place.

**Madam President:** Next question. Sen. Obika. [*Desk thumping*]

### **Petroleum Regulations**

#### **(Details of)**

**318. Sen. Taharqa Obika** asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

As regards the Petroleum Regulations made under section 29 of the Petroleum Act, Chap. 62:01, can the Minister advise:

- (i) whether a Petroleum Register has been instituted;
- (ii) whether the documents referred to in the Register are available to the public for examination;
- (iii) if the answer to (ii) is in the affirmative; what mechanisms are available for the public to access said documents; and

- (iv) what is the waiting period for persons to gain access to said documents?

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan):** Thank you very much, Madam President. In response to (i), the Petroleum Register has been instituted. In response to (ii), the information is available however, the actual exploration and production licenses and the production sharing contracts are not available to public viewing, due to confidentiality obligations within the license and/or contracts. In response to (iii), the information within the Petroleum Register can be viewed on the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries website at <http://www.energy.gov.tt/explorationandproduction> and <http://www.energy.gov.ttpetroleumengineer-register>. And response to (iv), there is no waiting period to access to our website.

**Madam President:** Sen. Obika.

**Sen. Obika:** Thank you, Madam President. Can the hon. Minister indicate what does the record of or registration entail in terms of the regulations that support the Act, regarding the availability of the documents?

**Madam President:** Sen. Obika, that question is not allowed. Sen. Hosein.

**2.15 p.m.**

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Madam President. Can the Minister indicate when was the petroleum register instituted?

**Madam President:** Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** Well I guess it was always instituted once the Act requires it. However, it has not been as updated as probably we would like and we are working feverishly to get it current. And my understanding is that it is almost current, but the key fact here is that when you make regulations and you make legislation, it provides for certain information, but then you have these

confidentiality clauses that stymie that process. I just want to make the point further that in the energy sector in particular, we are subject to significant commercial confidentiality clauses. It is a fact of the industry, it is a global phenomenon, and it is a reality that we will have to live in, in this country.

**Sen. Obika:** Thank you, Madam President. Will the successor companies of Petrotrin have the appropriate licences on the register?

**Sen. The Hon. F. Khan:** The licences that were Petrotrin licences in the vesting order, they have all been transferred to Heritage, Guaracara and/or Paria.

**Sen. Obika:** Have they been properly placed on the register, Madam President?

**Madam President:** One second.

**Sen. Obika:** He has not answered the question.

**Madam President:** So, because you think he has not answered it, you repeat it? How about you use your question time to ask—to finesse your question.

**Sen. Obika:** I will ask a different question. We have advanced in exposure. In terms of transparency, Trinidad and Tobago, does the Minister see it as a conflict where Trinidad and Tobago consultants are making other countries have their contracts available online, for instance, Ghana, who has T&T consultants, but we are still stuck in the past?

**Madam President:** That question is not allowed. Next question, Sen. Obika.

### **Unemployment Levy**

#### **(Sums Received)**

**319. Sen. Taharqa Obika** asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

As regard the Unemployment Levy, can the Minister provide the sums received by the State for fiscal years 2016, 2017 and 2018?

**The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West):** Thank you, Madam President. Madam

President, for fiscal years 2016, 2017 and 2018, the State received revenues amounting to TT \$130.5 million, TT \$98.6 million and TT \$153.3 million respectively from the unemployment levy imposed on petroleum companies operating in Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Madam President.

**Sen. Obika:** Thank you, Madam President. Given the role of the unemployment levy, can the hon. Minister indicate what projects these funds have been used for?

**Madam President:** No, that question does not arise. Next question, Sen Obika.

**Sen. Obika:** Can the hon. Minister indicate if the unemployment levy has resulted in any impact into the increase of unemployment in Trinidad and Tobago in the past three years, given they have received in excess, or nearly \$400 million?

**Madam President:** That question also does not arise. Any further questions, Sen. Obika?

**Sen. Obika:** Can the hon. Minister indicate what this over \$300 million has been used for at all to the benefit of the population?

**Madam President:** No, that question also does not arise. So let us move on. Next question, Sen. Obika.

### **Blood Bank Donor Policy**

#### **(Details of)**

**320. Sen. Taharqa Obika** asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Can the Minister advise as to the policy of the Blood Bank with respect to donors who suffered with malaria in the past?

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, the current policy recognizes that the decision to permit donors who suffered from malaria to donate blood is dependent on two factors. The first factor is the type of malaria, the second factor is the nature of the treatment received. Madam President, many



of us will be surprised to know certain types of malaria could actually persist in the body or linger, as the doctors say, for up to 10 to 15 years. So it is really dependent on what type you have suffered. So, Madam President, the health care provider would make a decision based on the patient's history on a case by case basis, before determining whether someone who has suffered from malaria should be allowed to donate blood. I thank you.

**Sen. Obika:** Thank you, Madam President. Given the influx of foreigners—neighbouring foreigners—who were where malaria is prevalent based on the part of Venezuela they come from, can the hon. Minister indicate if that type of malaria that persists there is one which would permit them or deny them from giving blood.

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Madam President, yes I closed with case by case. So it does not matter where you come from, you could come from Mars, it is dependent on the type of the malaria, your patient history and a decision will be made on a case by case basis. I thank you.

**Madam President:** Sen. Obika.

**Sen. Obika:** I want to say that that is not the experience that I have had. I have had malaria and they told me I cannot give blood. But I want to ask the question—

**Madam President:** Sen. Obika, and I want to say, I want to say that you do not ask a supplementary question by saying “I want to say”. So please follow the Standing Orders. You are allowed to ask a question. Yes.

**Sen. Obika:** Can the hon. Minister indicate which centres in Trinidad and Tobago are equipped to provide this support for persons who wish to give blood but have suffered malaria?

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Madam President, I must apologize to my friend. I did not realize he is pursuing a personal matter. So I will try my best to help. But

as I said in my closing, the health care provider makes a determination on it. There are health facilities across the country, public and private. It is impossible for me to list all of them today or tomorrow. But my friend can rest assured that the health care facilities across the country, both private and public, are equipped to deal with this matter of the donation of blood. Thank you.

**Madam President:** Sen. Hosein.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Madam President. Can the Minister confirm whether or not adequate resources are being given to the blood bank to properly screen those persons who may have malaria?

**Madam President:** Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Madam President, I am pleased to say that I am not aware that any complaint has been made by the blood bank about a lack of resources. In fact, a rumour—I recall a rumour a few weeks ago, my friends may be familiar with, about the blood bank and the blood bank denied it. So I am not aware of any complaints about any lack of resources.

**Madam President:** Sen. Obika.

**Sen. Obika:** Can the hon Minister indicate for the benefit of the nation how many persons—what percentage of persons may have suffered from malaria and the impacts that it may have, even if you may not be able to present that answer today?

**Madam President:** That question does not arise.

### **Public Expenditure Review**

#### **(Details of)**

**323. Sen. Amrita Deonarine** asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

Having regard to the public expenditure review conducted by the World Bank, can the Minister state:

- (i) Whether it is the intention of the Government to make the Report public; and
- (ii) What are the main areas of inefficiencies and duplications identified in the Report, specifically with respect to the Ministries of Social Development and Family Services, Health and Education?

**The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West):** Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, at this time there is no immediate intention to publicize World Bank's Public Expenditure Review for Trinidad and Tobago, however, the recommendation suggested by the World Bank to improve efficiency in the social protection, health, and education sectors have been accepted and they are actively being considered by development Ministries for inclusion of their policies and decision-making processes. Madam President, the Public Expenditure Review highlighted the following major inefficiencies in Trinidad and Tobago's education, health, and social protection sectors.

In the social protection sector, the report from the Trinidad and Tobago Social Protection System is well established by standards of comparable countries. However, our country spends more on its social protection programme portfolio relative to GDP than any other Latin-American and Caribbean country. Social assistance spending in Trinidad and Tobago is generally high by regional standards. The LAC region's regional average for social assistance spending is close to the global average of 1.5 per cent of GDP, while Trinidad and Tobago's social assistance spending is over 4 per cent of GDP, the highest in the region.

Social protection spending in Trinidad and Tobago does not reflect the demographic distribution of the population. Spending on the elderly comprises the lion share of the social protection expenditure despite the relatively small size of

the demographic group compared to other age groups. In 2016, 21 per cent of the population was below the age of 14, 70 per cent between the ages of 16 and 64, and just 9 per cent was over the age of 65. Despite this, the elderly received an estimated 57 per cent of social protection spending in 2018, while spending on children, youths and people of working age declined over the last ten years. Social protection expenditure has become increasingly concentrated on a small number of programmes, including the Senior Citizens Programmes, the Unemployment Relief Programme, the Community-Based Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme and the On the Job Training Programme. Over the last decade these programmes have accounted for more than the social protection allocations, reaching 63 per cent in 2016. This was as a result of a decision taken by this administration to provide greater protection to the elderly population, by increasing the statutory limit to qualify for FCP. This measure added 9,000 new pensioners to the system in 2016.

The Senior Citizens Programme is Trinidad and Tobago's largest non-contributory social protection programme. Furthermore, the amount of total pension spending per elderly person in Trinidad and Tobago exceeds the OECD average. Trinidad and Tobago offers the most generous, basic and minimum pension benefits in the world relative to its per capita income.

In the health sector, Trinidad and Tobago has achieved broad improvements in its basic health indicators. This is the findings of the report, including maternal mortality, immunization, and child mortality rates and the prevalence of communicable diseases is falling. Unfortunately, the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases is driving a rapid increase in health care cost. The escalating treatment cost was a major budgetary challenge to the public health system. The public health system suffers from high personnel cost and a shortage

of qualified workers. This shortage is due to the frequent emigration of skilled worker and personnel from the public to the private sector. As such, regional health authorities have been forced to hire consultants and specialists at high rates and often at the expense of the other inputs. Trinidad and Tobago suffers from inadequate information systems, combined with weak control and governance mechanisms in its health sector. The lack of a unified, comprehensive information system hinders Trinidad and Tobago from benefiting from the efficiency gains of coordinated disease management and cost containment.

The Education Sector: As stated by the World Bank the educational outcomes in Trinidad and Tobago have improved in recent years and its performance compares favourably to that of its regional and structural peers.

**Madam President:** Minister. Minister, your time is up.

**Sen. The Hon. A. West:** Thank you, Madam President.

**2.30 p.m.**

**Madam President:** Sen. Deonarine.

**Sen. Deonarine:** Thank you, Madam President. May I ask the hon. Minister to continue with the inefficiencies outlined in the report in the education sector?

**Madam President:** Well, you will have to put it in a certain question.

**Sen. Deonarine:** Okay. Thank you, Madam President. Can the hon. Minister of Finance indicate the inefficiencies outlined in the report in the education sector?

**Madam President:** Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. A. West:** Sure, Madam President. The World Bank noted that the Government spends a very large share of its education budget on tertiary education and skills training relative to peer countries. These high levels of expenditure are driven primarily by subsidies. Although the means test as it relates to Government Assisted Tertiary Education (GATE) is a good measure to generate fiscal savings,

the income thresholds for means testing are set too high.

The current thresholds leave more than two-thirds of the tertiary education students fully subsidized. Trinidad and Tobago appears to obtain poor value for money in education structure despite the high ratio of infrastructure spending, education infrastructure is in a poor condition as repairs and maintenance appear to be seriously under budgeted. The World Bank noted that the growth in the early childhood care education subsector over the past decade has constituted a major improvement in Trinidad and Tobago's education system. However, average spending in the pre-primary education during the period 2013 to 2015 represented just 2.5 per cent of total government education spending, significantly below the 10.5 per cent of Trinidad and Tobago's regional peers.

**Madam President:** Yes, Sen. Hosein.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, having regard to the Minister's answer at (i), can the Minister give the reason why the Government does not want to make this World Bank Report public?

**Madam President:** Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. A. West:** Madam President, the Government is still assessing the results of the programme and determining how best to ensure implementation before it makes the report public.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Can the Minister then give a time frame in which we can expect to see a copy of this report, please?

**Madam President:** Well, that question does not arise based on the answer that was given.

### **STANDING ORDER 77(3)**

#### **Continuation of Bills in the Fifth Session**

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin**

**Khan):** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, in accordance with Standing Order 77(3), I beg to move that the following Bills be restored to the Order Paper in the Fifth Session of the Eleventh Parliament:

1. The Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Amdt.) Bill, 2019;
2. The Animals (Diseases and Importation) (Amdt.) Bill, 2019;
3. The Livestock and Livestock Products Board (Repeal) Bill, 2019; and
4. The Evidence (Amdt.) Bill, 2019.

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **GOVERNMENT SAVINGS BONDS (AMDT.) BILL, 2019**

**The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West):** Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I beg to move:

That a Bill to amend the Government Savings Bonds Act, Chap. 71:41, be now read a second time.

Madam President, before you this afternoon is the Government Savings Bonds (Amdt.) Bill, 2019. The objective of the Bill is to amend the Government Savings Bonds Act, Chap 71:41, to make provisions for tax-free government bonds to be issued, to facilitate the purchase of Housing Development Corporation (HDC) houses and to increase the total value of bonds issued under the Act. The proposed amendments to the Act are premised on Government's policy objective to provide increased access to adequate, affordable and decent housing to the general population. A concurrent policy objective of the amendments, Madam President, is to encourage individuals to implement a savings plan towards the purchase of affordable housing by offering an attractive and easily accessible investment instrument that will enable persons to attain homeownership in the shortest possible time frame.

Madam President, the Government Savings Bonds was enacted in 1962 to authorize the issue of savings bonds, to declare the terms and conditions applicable to the bonds issued and to provide for the right of securities of bondholders. The Act was subsequently amended by Act No. 50 of 1982, Act No. 103 of 1983, Act No. 11 of 1988 and Act No. 14 of 1995. The Act at present provides the issue of four different types of savings bonds namely: Government Savings Bonds, National Tax Free Savings Bonds, Tax Free Housing Bonds and National Savings Bonds. In the case of the Government Savings Bonds, National Tax Free Savings Bonds and the Tax Free Housing Bonds, Regulations have been made under section 8 of the Act which prescribe the particular aspects of each type of savings bonds. Government Savings Bonds Regulations were introduced by Government Notice 88 of 1962, National Tax Free Savings Bonds Regulations by Government Notice 2016 of 1977 and Tax Free Housing Bonds Regulations by Legal Notice 157 of 1988. Tax Free Housing Bonds were introduced into the Government Savings Bonds Act by Act No. 11 of 1988.

These legislative amendments appear to have been intended to facilitate a system under which tax-free housing bonds were to be issued by the Government to individuals, the proceeds of which could be utilized for the provision of mortgage facilities by approved mortgage companies. The system was supported by consequential amendments to the Income Tax Act, Chap. 75:01, in particular to section 8 of that Act which treats with exemption to income tax, and the Corporation Tax Act, Chap. 75:02, in respect of which the Fifth Schedule was amended to provide a tax benefit to approved mortgage companies and was facilitated by the then operational National Housing Authority.

Madam President, in January 2015, by Finance Act No. 2 of 2015, and I will repeat, in January 2015, the National Tax Free Savings Bonds Regulations were



amended in regulation 9, to significantly decrease the interest rates of that category of bond from 6 per cent as it was then for five years, 7 per cent for seven years and 8 per cent for 10 years, to: 1 per cent for the five-year bond, 2 per cent for the seven- year bond and 3 per cent for the 10-year bond.

These amendments—these reductions in the interest payable under those bonds were introduced in January of 2015, and the stated rationale for the introduction was that the decrease was necessary because the rates payable under the bonds at that time were out of sync with the market. However, what they did was they deprived the general public of access to a reasonable return on most of their investments. So that, on coming into Government, Madam President, this administration recognized that there was a paucity of low-risk investment opportunities with attractive returns open to the average citizen; persons such as pensioners and hard-working tax-paying individuals who do not have the quantity of money that is generally needed to invest in the types of instruments that are usually put out by commercial banks and other such issuers. The National Investment Fund contributed to relieving this. Continuing in that vein of providing a much needed stimulus to our domestic capital market while at the same time providing greater accessibility to housing, it is proposed that a new category of bonds be established under the Act, namely the HDC Housing Bonds. These bonds will have the added feature of the ability to be used directly for the purchase of a house from the HDC. It is also proposed, Madam President, that these new HDC bonds be tax-free and that there be no limit on the value of the houses purchased under the HDC Housing Bonds. The particular aspects of the HDC Housing Bonds will be set out in the regulations to be made under section 8 of the Act.

Madam President, I now turn to the specific provisions of the short Bill before us today. The Bill consists of 5 clauses. Clauses 1 and 2 are preliminary

provisions. Clause 1 sets out the short title of the Bill and clause 2 is the interpretation section of the Bill which only defines one term and that is the word “Act” which refers to the Act being amended by the Bill.

Clause 3 of the Bill will insert a new section 2B into the Bill to the effect of the proceeds of the sale of tax-free HDC Housing Bonds issued under the Act will be applied solely for the purchase of housing from the HDC by individuals. This clause is to operate notwithstanding section 2A of the Act. The rationale for this provision, Madam President, is to allow for the mechanisms currently under the Act related to the tax-free housing bonds to continue to operate while at the same making provision for the issue of HDC Housing Bonds under the Bill.

Madam President, as I mentioned earlier, the Act currently provides for four category of bonds, one of which is the tax-free housing bonds. Tax-free housing bonds had be previously issued under the Act to facilitate the purchase of housing through mortgages. Pursuant to section 2A of the Act:

“The proceeds of...tax free housing bonds...shall be applied solely for the provision of mortgages to individuals for the purchase of houses where the cost of construction together with the cost of...land does not exceed two hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

So you will recognize that this is a dated provision because we no longer get houses—as a general rule—with land costing less than \$250,000. The possibility—we are leaving that provision in because the possibility exists that there still remains some holders of tax-free savings bonds on the market. And it is therefore proposed that the provisions currently in the Act related to the tax-free housing bond be preserved so that holders of those instruments will not be negatively impacted.

Clause 4 of the Bill will amend section 3 of the Act to attain three

objectives: first, the Minister will now be authorized to issue both transferable and non-transferable bonds. This amendment is necessary, Madam President, to allow for flexibility in the issue of bonds so that where necessary, for example, to facilitate the purchase of housing, bonds may be transferable, and where it is not desirable for bonds to be transferable, they may not be issued in transferable form. Secondly, clause 4 will raise the current limit of issue of bonds from \$2 billion to \$3 billion.

**2.45 p.m.**

The raising of the limit is necessary so that it will be feasible for the Government to issue more than one category of bonds at the same time or to issue bonds during the tenure of a previously issued bond without suppressing the limit. Finally, Madam President, clause 4 of the Bill will amend section 3 of Act to allow for the limit under section 3 to be amended as may be specified by the Minister by Order. And those on the other side will be happy to know that the Order will be subject to affirmative resolution.

The final clause of the Bill, clause 5, will amend the Schedule of the Act in Part A to insert the new category of bonds, HDC Housing Bonds, and in Part B, to provide a tax-free HDC Housing Bonds Regulations to be enacted to cover the issue of tax-free HDC Housing Bonds.

Madam President, it is in the case for all bonds issued under the Act, it is intended that regulations be enacted to prescribe the aspects of the HDC Housing Bonds including matters such as the interest rate, maturity profile, encashment of the bonds, authorized fiscal agents, where and how bonds may be purchased and matters related thereto.

Madam President, in considering this issue and in determining how best to implement the plan to issue housing bonds, what we have found is that there are a

number of people who have made applications to the HDC for housing, and many of them complain that they have to wait a long time before they are called with an offer of a house, but even after all of those years many of them do not have the down payment to make towards the housing. So we wanted, in addition to raising financing, to allow HDC to construct the houses that are required, because as we would have said from time to time, the list of applicants is currently at 176,000.

In addition to that, we wanted to create a mechanism to allow people and encourage people to save towards their ownership of the housing. This mechanism will allow people to do that, and it is for those reasons that we bring the proposed amendments before you. We recommend that you give us your full support in this, we ask you for your full support in this. I thank you, Madam President. I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question proposed.*

**Madam President:** Sen. Obika. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Taharqa Obika:** Thank you, Madam President. Now, I want to address frontally the point of housing bonds in the manner in which it has been ventilated publicly by this Government, given that they are facing an election in 11 months' time and have not provided housing for people in Trinidad and Tobago, and where they have, there are serious deficiencies as some of my colleagues will point to when they rise to contribute to this Bill.

Now, Madam President, the first and most disturbing issue is that nowhere in the presentation of the hon. Minister, did the hon. Minister seek to clarify for the public's benefit what exactly will be the advantage of holding the housing bonds, except to say that they may be in a position to put funds towards their down payment. How much funds?—again, the question would be depending on the restrictions in the Bill. The hon. Minister would have been on good footing if some

clarity as to what maximum a citizen can purchase, given that there are exceptions, this bond introduces an exception to the parent Act, given the last five minutes of the Minister's presentation regarding where the Act restricts construction, bonds particular to a figure that was mentioned, \$250,000.

Now, in the Act or the Regulations there are some issues there regarding the maximum someone can hold. All right? And if I were to turn to the relevant page:

“A person shall not purchase or hold more than the value of \$25,000.00 in bonds.”

All right? That is in the regulation at part 4—part 6, sorry.

If we are to stick to that, are we saying that there are exceptions regarding this particular HDC bond where that is concerned? Because one can imagine that for some houses that the HDC provides or many houses that the HDC provides, a \$25,000 down payment would be woefully insufficient given that they may ask for, in some cases, 5 per cent and in some cases 10 per cent. And when you have HDC houses being available to persons at \$650,000, 10 per cent of that is \$65,000, and 5 per cent of that is \$32,500. So in essence, we are asking the question for the Minister to provide some clarity on one issue. One, what are the limits placed on individuals regarding the quantum of bonds that they can hold? That is the first and very important question.

A second and very important issue, Madam President, is that when these bonds were floated the story started off very simple, you know, dasheen and sauce, and by the time it reached the public, corn, cow heel and everything added, because it was touted that this housing bonds scheme would be that you get your house card, and the Government is giving the citizen who can pay almost as they used to say, “if you can pay your tithes you can reach the promised land”. So if you pay for this bond and you have this bond, you will be able to reach the promised

land of owning a house. But then the hon. Minister, Madam President, did not seek to clarify whether or not that is, in fact, true; whether or not this is a pay-for-priority scheme or whether or not the bonds have absolutely nothing to do with the Housing Development Corporation. And I say that that is very sad because then it does not help sharpen the quality of debate, because, let us look at the two scenarios, Madam President.

If, in fact, the bonds are pay-for-priority scheme, and the priority means that you would get access to HDC housing, then we have to question, what is the Government's policy on housing? What is the Government's policy on housing? But if we say, no it is not that, it is a system where you do not get any priority, and by virtue of paying for these bonds it is not—the Government is under no obligation, no connection to the HDC to give you even—to even move your file from one desk to another faster, it changes nothing.

And if I were to read these things properly, I would assume that it changes absolutely nothing. That nothing is changed from someone's entitlement to a house from purchasing these bonds, even if they purchase the maximum that the Government allows. Now, if that were to be the case, then we have to look at a different type of housing policy, but let us look at the former, the former as was advanced in the public space that, "hear wah going on", the PNM is bringing bonds so you could get a house.

And if we were to look at the way it was reported, because you cannot blame journalists, journalists say what the public feels. "Housing bonds to assist citizens in purchasing HDC homes", that is the headline in Loop TT and that article was on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, 2019. So you cannot blame the journalists for that statement, but how is it really, apart from having some funds for a down payment which they could save in other places, how does it really assist? Because if someone takes

\$25,000, Madam President, or \$10,000 and they are accustomed putting curry duck or barbecued leg and thigh together, they could make much more money than the 4½ per cent interest that the Government may offer if it is a 10-year bond, and I still have to get to how they actually arrived at a final figure because they have not come to the Parliament to indicate what will be the rate of interest that they are going to use. Because as far I know, calculation of interest for government bonds where you have the full faith and confidence of the Treasury of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, you follow the yield curve of the Central Bank, and the yield curve at 10 years as at August this year, last month, for a 10-year bond is 4.56. And if we were to take the assertion that is in the public space that it is 4½ per cent, I think the hon. Minister of Finance indicated that it may be 4½ per cent, then the only bond that would fetch a 4½ per cent rate of return would be a 10-year bond. Now, the Act provides for five-, seven- and 10-year periods from purchase to maturity.

So, the Government has not sought to clarify what rate of interest, and I stand to be corrected, unless the Minister wishes to correct me while I am on my feet, I can give way. The Government has not sought to clarify what will be the rate of interest that they will use. The hon. Minister only mentioned that under the Patrick Manning Government, rest his soul, they reduced the rates and so on and they came to do something new, January 2015, but other than that, the hon. Minister has not sought to indicate what exactly will this administration be doing. What is the rate that people are to look forward to?

So, it brings me to one conclusion, Madam President, this Bill has nothing to do with housing. This Bill has nothing to do with the people of Trinidad and Tobago saving any money at all, and this Bill is about one thing only. The Government in its haste to ensure they can purchase some votes for the election,

comes to the population to see if they can squeeze water from stone to get \$1 billion from the population.

Now, Madam President, a savings bond provides in the way in which it is crafted, is for persons who have excess liquidity. It is not for the fella or the young lady who is working on less than \$6,000 a month, which the majority of workers in this country are working for, who have to pay to send their children to preschool, who have to pay for food to be on the table; it is not for them, because they clearly would not have that extra \$20,000—extra nothing in this time, in this market to do any kind of savings because—you see, and you have to be very clear to the population.

I think it is very important, because the population, Madam President, the majority may not have the opportunity to pull the Government Savings Bonds Act, Chap. 71:41, and read through all the pages, they may not have that opportunity, so therefore, I want to point them to a particular page. I want to ask the Minister if, in fact, this will be upheld with the bonds that they are going to be issuing.

So, the “National Tax Free Savings Bonds Regulations”, if you were to turn to regulation 4:

“4. Bonds may not be encashed before maturity and payment on maturity of bonds shall be in the currency of Trinidad and Tobago.” “Bonds may not be encashed before maturity....”

What does that mean? That means you are locked in tighter than a b-mobile or Digicel contract with these bonds, you cannot get out of it. It is impossible for you to get out of it.

So therefore, if you are already hamstrung, you are a public servant, you are unionized by NUGFW, so you are not at the technical grade, and your salary is less than \$6,000. All right? But you are married, but the both salaries are less than



\$6,000. You are a single parent, even if you are a teacher earning 10 to \$15,000, but you are a single parent and you have significant obligations on the home front, so you do not have opportunity to save. So you encounter the Government's savings bonds and you hear it is 4½ per cent, tax-free and you say, "Aha, my Government is working for me". So you decide to put aside a \$10,000, "yuh scrape and ting and de sou sou money come in", you understand? You clean out some money from the credit union and you put it in and you say, "Aha, ah fix". A year and a half down the road you end up in a jam, Madam President, and your child has to go for some medical benefit that they need to get, you need to find money, and you go to the Government and you go to the Central Bank and say, "Aye, I had buy \$10,000 in bonds what year it was". "Yes, I get the interest, you understand, but I need to get \$9,500 now, or my child is in trouble." And then they pull the Act and shove it in your face, sorry, and they present it to you—I corrected that—and they present it to you very nicely. And in the Regulations, they say:

"Bonds may not be encashed before maturity and payment on maturity of bonds shall be in the currency of Trinidad and Tobago..."—dollars.

And then those people say, "But the Minister did not tell me that, when they float the bond". "They said these are bonds to help me." How can it be something to help me? How can it be something to help the people of Trinidad and Tobago? The single parents, the families, even though there are two parents working in the household, their salaries are not significant, and then those who are left on the breadline by this Government, how can it be to help them when in fact, they would not be able to encash it? So it is not for them.

Let us face the fact, Madam President, that this bond is not for the small man, it is not for the average citizen in Trinidad and Tobago. It is not for the public servants who are not at the technical grade; so that is a significant number. It is not

for the single parents, so even if they are at the technical grade, it is not for the single parents. It is not for the persons in the banks and the financial sector whose incomes do not match their expectations of a quality of life. It is not for persons who live day to day, the coconut vendor, the woman in the market, the fella pushing a trolley on Charlotte Street; it is not for them. The fella working short-drop in Point Fortin, from Point to Techier; in Laventille, from Laventille Road to Nelson Street; it is not for the average citizen in Charlotteville Tobago, you understand, supporting the fisherman.

Now, the fisherman might be in a position if he could manage to find some super gas, but the fella on the boat, he is not in the same boat to be able to purchase these things. So let us face the facts, this is not for the small man in this country. And where do we find who this is for? Where do we find that? Who this is for? All right? So I was looking at the Regulations there and I noticed it spelt out some—on the regulation 2, on the Act, it is on page 15:

“Bonds may be purchased and held by private individuals...”

—it may include some persons who have some savings—

“...and approved non-profit making organisations and charitable institutions resident in Trinidad and Tobago for tax purposes.”

Now, I believe I read somewhere else where there are persons who the Minister can allow to purchase the bonds, so the bonds are not for the small man.

So, Madam President, we have over 175,000—I believe—persons on the waiting list for the HDC, and the hon. Minister of Finance has said publicly that at least 50,000 of these people are in a position where they can qualify for the bonds. And I want to ask the Government, when the Minister of Finance said that, when persons go to the HDC and they provide their information, it is not in real time. Someone may have provided information five years ago, 10 years ago, 20 years

ago, and at that time they may have been in a position to qualify, they may have been a young professional with no children, you understand, not a—for the colloquial expression, “not a parrot on a stick” as we say in Trinidad and Tobago—but five years down the line they end up with two children, car loan and so, and other things, they may not be in a position as they were when they initially applied.

So therefore, I want to submit to the Government, Madam President, that it will never be 50,000 people on the HDC list. The fact that they are on the list is enough to tell you that the housing market does not cater to them, and I want to get into that. So there are persons who do not qualify and there are some issues we have to go into.

Now, I want say this. The first most damning issue when we deal with the HDC, Madam President, is that from 2005 to 2009, the HDC was forced to recreate its finances and I am quoting from a *Newsday* article here on the 13<sup>th</sup> of December, 2018, by Jensen La Vende, “HDC’s \$9.5B Hole Housing Agency Grapples to Bring Books Up-To-Date”, and we know who was in Government 2005 to 2009 and we know who was the Minister of Housing in 2005; it was the hon. Prime Minister, who now is the hon. Prime Minister. And this \$9.5 billion hole has resulted in KPMG providing a qualified opinion in the accounts which means that HDC has a significant problem in accounting for the moneys that go under their care, under the time half of which the current Prime Minister was in charge of HDC, in charge of housing.

So we have a big problem where the HDC, because of that debacle, cannot bring their finances up to date because of that period in time. They cannot bring their finances up to date, and we are now talking about the housing bond where HDC is at the centre of it; it cannot be. You have to fix the house of the HDC first before we can entrust them with funds.

Now—but then, of course that was—my understanding of where that was concerned was because the Government did not seek to clarify what is in the public space. But now I understand that this bond has nothing to do with the HDC, so then the HDC is actually irrelevant to that conclusion. This bond has to do with the Government, and policy.

So you have to ask the question? What is the main problem that the Government is attempting to solve by this Bill? Under the People's Partnership Government there was a home-owning democracy policy where as citizens of Trinidad and Tobago you deserved a stake in this country. [*Desk thumping*] So therefore, the Government saw it as its duty, to provide each and every citizen with shelter; that is why 7,000 houses were distributed. But when one of the many Ministers of Housing under this Government—because there were many. All right? We started off with Marlene Mc Donald, then Randall Mitchell, then Dr. Keith Rowley—

**Madam President:** Sen. Obika.

**Sen. T. Obika:**—now Edmund Dillon.

**Madam President:** If I could ask you—

**Sen. T. Obika:** To qualify. I apologize. You start with the hon. Marlene Mc Donald—

**Madam President:** No. No. Sen. Obika, let me just, if I could ask you, please, to try and stick to the Bill that we are treating with. Okay?

**Sen. T. Obika:** All right. So, Madam President, in the second half, I believe I have spent 20 minutes already, so in the second half of my contribution I want to really show the Government what they should have done when they brought this Bill to the Parliament.

Now firstly, Madam President, firstly, the issue that persons have is the sale

of tax free Housing Development Corporation Bonds. Many of the citizens of this country do not qualify individually to pay taxes. They would benefit from a tax free savings mechanism, yes, but at the same time they may not have the savings to participate. I want say that a policy where if you pay more, you qualify, it cannot be a policy that we could support in Trinidad and Tobago, but again, we hope that that was just hearsay and it is not really where the Government would be going on. Now, the underlying asset in any bond, Madam President, because we are talking about housing bonds for the purpose of the HDC by individuals. The underlying asset in any mortgage-backed security scheme would be the mortgages and the houses, but then, of course, this Bill has nothing to do with the HDC. This is a finance Bill, a money Bill, and what we should really be debating, Madam President, is the performance of this Government with the funds that have been given to it by the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago. Because the Minister spoke about the bond, but did not speak about any penalties for disposing, any opportunity for disposing of the bond, and the parent Act does not provide wiggle room of any kind, so I want the hon. Minister to provide some clarity.

Is it that the hon. Minister is saying that if a taxi driver working a short-drop—not the long-drop fellas because they make plenty of money, they make enough, not plenty, but they make enough. If a fella working a short-drop buys a bond and he comes now to redeem it because “de car eh workin”, or even the fella working the long-drop, “de car eh workin”, is the Government going to show them the parent Act, the Regulations, and say you cannot redeem the bond. The hon. Minister needs to clarify that. All right?

The hon. Minister also needs to clarify, Madam President, because you mentioned the HDC for the purpose of purchase of houses from the HDC. Is the HDC in any way going to provide preference of any kind for holders of such a

bond?—it is very important. And, of course, if persons are able to dispose of the bonds, if there are any penalties for so doing.

Now, Madam President, there is a reason why we have this bond today. The reason is because our housing market is not inclusive, it excludes many citizens. Many citizens cannot purchase and qualify for shelter for their families. Many persons who are graduates from universities, tech-voc institutions, they do not benefit from permanent employment or employment over a contract period, over a sufficient time to make them qualify for a mortgage of any kind, that is why they would definitely have to resort to waiting in line at the HDC but, again, this Bill does not take that into consideration because many of those persons still will not qualify for a mortgage now, even if the HDC directs them to do so. So therefore, the Government should have ventilated if there was any change or improvement in their housing policy.

Now, let us look at the housing bond experience in our Caribbean nations. The Bahamas has a housing bond scheme which I want to submit may end up in a similar style here in Trinidad and Tobago, where the Minister may have exemptions on offer for other entities to take up the bonds, because I cannot see the average citizen having \$1 billion in extra savings to lock in, where they will have no access to it for five, seven or 10 years. So when you look at—and I want to quote from the IDB report regarding the state of social housing. In The Bahamas they mentioned that bondholders include the national insurance board, clearing banks and insurance companies.

So, is it that the Government is really going to be doing as they did with the National Investment Fund and instructing their subordinates who are running the state enterprises to purchase these bonds? That is a question that I want the hon. Minister to respond to. So, I also want to respond to some statements that were

made by the Government regarding these bonds in the public space.

Madam President, because the bonds were issued, were touted as to be wrapped up with HDC, and because of this Government's record of not providing government guarantee for the National Investment Fund, for example, for that scheme, one would have asked the question: Would there be any deposit insurance? But then we have to assume from the hon. Minister's statement that these bonds will be given the full backing, full faith and confidence of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. You have to assume that. You have to assume that a government guarantee will be in place which will, of course, impact our debt-to-GDP levels, which will, of course, impact our debt service ratio levels as a nation when the Government has to pay these interests, the semi-annual interest as they fall due; and I know Sen. Henry would understand exactly and concur with what I am saying.

**3.15 p.m.**

So the Government—the Minister needs to state specifically if there is an explicit government guarantee for these bonds. And if that be the case then there will be no need for depositing insurance. Now, the proceeds of the bond go to the Government. There is a bigger question that everyone is asking, Madam President. What is the Government's housing programme? How many houses they plan to construct? [*Desk thumping*] You know the 5,000 that the Chinese got sent packing for, they cannot construct those. [*Desk thumping*] So, Madam President, I assume I have—anyway, I believe I have about 11 minutes again.

So I want to ask that question, because this Government has failed to construct, has failed to present a credible housing programme for all levels, persons who can only pay rent, but may not be significantly low income, but they cannot qualify for mortgages. These are young professionals who cannot qualify.

Then there are persons who are low income and definitely do not qualify for mortgages. What is the—how many houses will be built in each tier of the housing market with this money or if none at all will be built? Because in 11 months, to prepare greenfield sites you will not even reach the point of completing the garbage disposals.

So, Madam President, the other question that we have to ask would be, when the HDC holds these bonds, when the HDC holds these bonds there is no cash transfer to the HDC at the point in time when they are holding these bonds, and these bonds must be held to maturity. So then what would be the cash position of the Housing Development Corporation? I see the smirk on Sen. Dr. Henry's face as he understands the point.

**Madam President:** Sen. Obika, that actually is not the way to refer to a colleague.

**Sen. T. Obika:** I apologize. I see the warm smile—that is the term I really want to use—on Sen. Dr. Lester Henry's face when I ask that question. What is the—what will be the cash position of the Housing Development Corporation on an ongoing basis when these holders of these bonds start to roll in? Because, Madam President, when someone qualifies for a house, the HDC encourages them to come with a \$25,000 down-payment in the initial case and then they may encourage them to put more as they can. But when they come with a \$25,000 bond there is no cash coming to HDC. How can they then support their housing programme?

This is a poison pill for the HDC. [*Desk thumping*] This is a poison pill for the HDC. What does that mean? It means that whoever gets to run the HDC, when the Government changes hands to the United National Congress in 11 months, will have to deal with these poison pills. [*Desk thumping*] So, and then it begs the question as to who is advising this Government? Who is advising this Government, Madam President?



**Sen. S. Hosein:** Sen. Dr. Henry.

**Sen. T. Obika:** I know Sen. Henry would not advise them on that at all. He is a macroeconomics specialist. Who is advising this Government? Because what this Bill is going to result in is the opposite of what it is touted for. The HDC will not get a single cent including when the bonds are in their possession, and that is the sad thing. On top of which, the Government is under no obligation, in this Bill, to remit any of the proceeds of this bond to the HDC, not a cent, not one red cent, but we “doh” print cents again, not a five cent, will go to the HDC from this.

So, Madam President, we are saying, we are telling the media that the housing bonds will help HDC to build houses and then help persons to get houses in an election year, but it does the opposite. It does not give the HDC a dollar, it does not commit the Government to give the HDC a dollar for their housing programmes, neither does it give the person who is holding the bond the opportunity to get a house, because you have to qualify based on HDC’s criteria. And as far as the HDC goes, a \$25,000 down payment is a \$25,000 down payment, whether it is a bond, or it is cash, they do not want to hear nothing “gih we it”. Because they could take the same \$25,000 and invest it somewhere else and get the same 4½ per cent after tax.

So that is the question. But then again this is a Government, Madam President—so I am saying that this decision is against the best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. But it should come as no surprise. Because this is a Government, in an effort to get funds for their final year of office, by not having to take over its responsibility after shutting down, callously, Petrotrin, have gotten into bed with Trafigura, responsible for the deaths of 16 Africans in the Ivory Coast, over 31,000 of them brought class action suits and won it against Trafigura, bringing that African killing company to Trinidad and Tobago.

**Madam President:** Sen. Obika. Sen. Obika, you have five more minutes. May I advise you to use that time wisely. You are now being irrelevant, please.

**Sen. T. Obika:** So, Madam President, the Government is on notice that if you really wanted to build houses for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, you would have never brought this Bill. You would have actually gone out and build the houses for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] If I were to use the terms of a former Minister of Housing, the hon. Randall Mitchell, when the hon. Minister said that the PNM does not have a home owning democracy policy. “He say” they have a roof-over-your-head policy. So I do not know if it is the cardboard that the people is sleeping on the street, is the roof over their head. So the Government does not care about the citizens’ need for shelter and it is demonstrated fully in this Bill.

So I want to say to this Government, we are ready for them. The people of Trinidad and Tobago are ready and we are not going to stand by and allow them to pull wool over the eyes of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Clause 4 of the Bill speaks to an increase in the total value of bonds that can be issued from \$2 billion to \$3 billion. Madam President, the debt service ratio of this country, for every dollar that we earn we spend much more on an average for the last two years, 25 cents in debt and that has been brought by under the mismanagement of our financial situation by this Government. If you turn to the Auditor General’s Report you would see charges on account of public debt have skyrocketed under this Government. Under the Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government, it was less than 10 cents on the dollar. [*Desk thumping*]

Clause 4 of the Bill, Madam President, is going to make that debt service ratio even worse. And I want to submit that if the Government cares about the people of Trinidad and Tobago they would take this Bill, fold it nicely and pack it

away and simply build the houses that the people need, resource the HDC, get to the bottom of that misappropriation of funds from 2005 to 2009 that they cannot account for, that have the qualified opinion from KPMG, fix the HDC, fix the housing situation in this country, and respond to the needs of the people of Trinidad and Tobago and I submit. Thank you.

**Sen. Deeroop Teemal:** Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute on this Bill, The Government Savings Bonds (Amdt.) Bill, 2019.

Madam President, we all know that housing is beyond a significant percentage of our population and it is inevitable that the State enter into sponsored or subsidized affordable housing. It is inevitable to give those who really cannot afford that hope and that opportunity to have a roof over their heads, not as a handout, but as an investment. So therefore, whenever a Bill comes where there is initiative that promotes affordable housing to deserving and qualified citizens of Trinidad and Tobago we are challenged to look at that initiative on its merit.

However we may look at it, this bond issue, this increase for tax-free housing savings bonds, it is really a loan to the Government for investment in affordable housing. And I would have liked some, probably some detailed information as to the previous \$2 billion bond, tax-free housing bonds, what did that bond issue really produce in terms of affordable housing? What was the yield? What were the results of that investment in affordable housing? The number of units. Was there a particular target in terms of the range of low-income families in our country? What was the focus and the results?

Madam President, I think over the years when we have to look at the statistical records of the provision of affordable housing by various Governments you would realize that we have had limited success as a nation in this regard for the yield is significantly less. Consistently over decades, the yield has been

significantly less than what the demand actually is, the projected demand. And the question arises, are we really doing enough with regard to provision of affordable housing and with whatever resources that we put towards this challenge, are we efficient in the provision of the affordable housing?

My considered opinion is that we have stopped really researching and drilling down into efficient provision of efficient affordable housing, not only with regard to construction methodologies, but the use of technology as much as possible to increase efficiency, the creation of unique financing models and financing mechanism that would drive affordable housing and the use of as much local materials as possible and increasing labour productivity with regard to the construction industry, all of these things coming into one package to say that efficient affordable housing, we make it—it contributes to increasing the number of units we can provide with the same amount of money. And in that context I would like to strongly suggest that a research council on affordable housing be established, a research council that would draw on all the resources of the Government there, Housing Development Corporation, the University of the West Indies, all professionals that are engaged in the housing industry, whereby we can really evolve, whereby we can create, determine direction and opportunities for affordable housing for our nation.

Madam President, to get back to the essence of the Bill, we are looking essentially at one additional billion dollars again. And again, I would have liked to see some information as to what this billion dollars is going to be applied to. Maybe it is coming, maybe it would be there in the budget, I am not sure, but what is the focus of this billion dollars? Who is going to determine? Is it being left up to the Housing Development Corporation or is the Government going through regulations to actually point out to the Housing Development Corporation this is

how this money is going to be used in order to maximize the use of this money by putting as much units in the hands of citizens of this country?

Is the focus going to be on the income group that is worst off? And I refer to the rent—what is categorized as the rent category in the HDC or the rent to own category classification in the HDC. Is the bulk of this money going there so that we really tackle poverty and offer the poor opportunity to have a shelter? Or is this billion dollars really going to service the deficit that HDC operates with. I think from figures that were thrown out by the Minister of Finance, unfortunately I do not have the article to quote from, but maybe \$700 million to \$800 million annual deficit is what HDC has to contend with. So how are we going to allocate the one billion so that it brings the maximum returns to the most disadvantaged group in our society? I think we would like to, I would like to have some more information on where we are, how we are going to allocate this billion dollars.

In that context, Madam President, I would just like to throw out that within the whole portfolio of the Housing Development Corporation we have not really started as a nation looking at providing affordable housing for our senior citizens. In all of the categories we look at income and all of those things, but particularly for senior citizens there are some countries of the world where a lot of focus is placed on housing for senior citizens. Because senior citizens having made a tremendous contribution to the nation, you know, when they are retired and all of those things, a lot of them still do not own a house. And their needs are very specific and I am putting forward, you know, that the Housing Development Corporation has to start looking at the provision of affordable housing geared for senior citizens. And maybe, Madam President, consideration could be given for a pilot project out of this money, out of this billion dollars, a pilot project for senior citizens. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, I know the HDC has over the past years engaged in the public/private partnership or what we refer to as the PPP, as an initiative to generate private sector participation in the provision of affordable housing. I know there are some projects on and maybe the success rate for the private sector to engage in this investment is not as high as expected because, of course, private investors are for-profit companies driven by shareholders who want a rate of return on their investment. And I do know that there is a 30 per cent tax credit, that in some of these PPPs, that the private investor is entitled to as an incentive to enter into the affordable housing market.

Madam President, I am not sure how much of the moneys raised from this bond issue is going into these public/private partnership projects or if the entire amount is going into the other categories I mentioned earlier. And just as a point on the side, is that really and truly if we are to provide incentives for the investment in affordable houses by the private sector, maybe we would like to consider a greater tax credit, maybe a dollar for dollar tax credit programme to encourage private sector participation in affordable housing to support all the initiatives being taken by Government.

Madam President, I think that also providing housing bonds where the private sector could invest in, in addition to just individuals, but the private sector being able to invest in housing bonds that could be also used as an avenue for equity to raise financing to get into the affordable housing market is another thing that could be looked at. So when you look at tax credit, affordable housing tax credit combined with tax free housing bonds in combination, it may be powerful enough to encourage our private sector to make the affordable housing market attractive enough to provide a good rate of return thus helping tremendously with the deficit that we are faced in as a nation in providing affordable housing for our

citizens.

Madam President, one other thing is that there is an emerging market worldwide. In fact, in some of the more established European countries where there are housing loan associations, housing associations and housing cooperatives, the not-for-profit sector in affordable housing. There are significant not-for-profit sectors in affordable housing in other parts of the world and maybe as a country that is something that we could really look at developing, the not-for-profit sector in affordable housing. And of course incentives and direction have to come from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in this regard.

There are some housing loan associations from way back when, there is the General Building & Loan Association on Chacon Street, that old building there who have been there for decades. That one comes to memory. I am not sure how much left—[*Interruption*] yeah, Trinidad Building & Loan Association, and if that concept of housing cooperative where this incentive for housing bonds be afforded to this not for profit sector then it can also be a very powerful mechanism, I suggest to help to address the deficit in affordable housing.

Madam President, in concluding, as I said at the beginning, any initiative to provide affordable housing, particularly for the poor that falls into that programme of those providing housing for rent and the rent to own, I would lend my support to. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Public Utilities (Sen. The Hon. Robert Le Hunte):** Thank you very much, Madam President, for allowing me to join this debate. And I would like to thank the Independent Senator for the suggestions and for his contribution.

**Hon. Senator:** What about Sen. Obika?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** I will get to Sen. Obika.

“This Bill”—Madam President—“seeks to amend the Government Savings

Bonds Act, Chap. 71:41 to make provision for tax free Government Bonds to be issued in respect of the purchase of Housing Development Corporation houses and to increase the total value of bonds issued under the Act.”

Madam President, this is a very short Bill and you know as usual I promise you that this time I would not—just want to deal with certain aspects of the Bill as presented. I mean, the Bill talks about really three clauses and one of the major clauses that they attempt to amend in this Bill, which is the Bill will seek to insert a new section 2B which would provide that tax free housing bonds the:

“...Housing Development Corporation Housing Bonds issued under this Act”—which are to be—“applied solely for the purpose of”—purchasing Housing Development Corporation houses—“by individuals.”

Madam President, as was outlined by my Cabinet colleague when presenting this Bill, there are lots of issues, there are myriad issues with regard to the housing market and there are a number of things that need to be done. We will talk a little bit about borrowing and we will talk a little bit about a number of things. This Bill attempts to deal with a particular issue where some of the amendments are proposed in clause 3.

Madam President, as we know and we have to accept that there are a lots of people who have applied for housing. I talked about 176,000 applications that are outside there looking for houses. Therefore, we have recognized that as people apply there is clearly—and this is something that has come on from one administration to the other—a supply and demand issue and you are trying to fix that issue over time. And therefore I will talk a little bit about how you fund this thing afterwards, I will deal with that in another time. But let us deal strictly with what is before us.

So you have people, there is normally a waiting line; there is waiting line for



you to get your house. You apply and you hear people talking for years, sometimes five years, 10 years depending that you are waiting to get your house. That way we have to stimulate the production of houses and we have to make sure that there is a responsibility for the people who are waiting, most of the times that these individuals are called upon to make a down payment. That is the reality. You are waiting and you have to make a down payment. What has happened? You have a lot of individuals after waiting when they are called upon to now come to get a house you are caught waiting. You do not have your down payment, which again provides a problem because of course you are passed by and you are scrambling at that point in time.

And therefore this Bill attempts to deal with certain amendments to the housing Act that would allow for you to while you are waiting to allow for you to save money while you are waiting, because you are saving money to be able to build, to own your home. This is for individuals and this amendment attempts to allow for you while you are waiting to develop your down payment to be able to do it at an attractive rate, to save money and be able to take this money and apply it towards reducing the amount of the mortgage as your down payment to your house.

Madam President, that is simple, that is common sense, that makes good sense. If you take this away, let us assume you do nothing, what is the situation that prevails? The situation that prevails is that if you are saving towards your house now, you are probably saving money in a bank where you are probably getting at this time point in time 1 per cent, if so much, or half of 1 per cent interest. That is your present situation. And therefore it also or worse yet you are not saving at all and when you get the house you are scrambling at that point in time. And therefore—that is what exists.

So you take this Bill and you say I do not want this, I do not want it. Then you are in a worse position. This attempts to deal with a particular situation. It allows you to save money at a higher rate of interest and the rate of interest that we spoke about and we spoke about this rate of interest since the last time, since the mid-year review, at 4½ per cent it allows you to save money at a good rate of interest. And therefore it also encourages—Madam President, savings is a good thing, you know. Savings is a good thing. I mean, poor as my family and my mother was and my parents were, at the end of the day if it was 10 cents out of my parents', of my father's income, my parents always taught me the need to save.

**3.45 p.m.**

If it was five cents a month, in those days—because my father worked in TPD and, therefore, you have to instil in any country and motivate individuals to save, especially if you are saving for a targeted goal. So targeted savings is critical and this Bill simply attempts to facilitate what I would consider targeted savings for a house to give the individuals who are doing that an additional opportunity. This is not compelling anybody to do it, you know. If you choose to continue saving as you are doing—because whether you like it or not, when you get the house you will be required to make a down payment. So you could do nothing. You could not do this. You could continue saving as you want to. This gives you the opportunity that if you want to save this way, you are getting 4½ per cent versus zero per cent and you are providing yourself with an opportunity to get a good return and to use your savings for the purpose for which you want it to be used for. As I said, this is not compulsory. This is helping people in a certain—a group of people, to allow you to go along that particular path.

And, Madam President, savings again, you know, it is critical for you to save rather than borrow. I mean, I am preaching to the population now, having

turned leaf in career paths in the middle of my career. But it is better to save than to borrow. You understand? Because if you are saving, the reality is, if somebody could save these bonds at a rate of 4½ per cent and save \$20,000, \$30,000, Madam President, if you try to borrow—if you save \$50,000—and I am giving whatever it is that you could save. If you decide, instead of savings, “I am going to go and try to borrow all the money”—and you might be lucky, when you are called upon for the house, to be able to go to get a mortgage—and you might be able to get 100 financing. Some institutions do that. But that additional \$50,000 that you are borrowing, rather than saving—and I use an example. Whether it is 10, whether it is 20, whether it is 50, if you borrow that over a 25-year period, you are actually going to be paying back—because whatever you borrow you have to pay back. And when you have to pay back, you are paying back close to \$80,000. So you borrow 50 and you are paying back \$80,000.

And, therefore, we need then to encourage individuals. Hence the reason to encourage you to save, because if you save for that down payment, rather than going and borrowing it, you will therefore find that it will cost you so much more paying for this over a 25-year period. In addition to that, if you save your money again, and you borrow, when you go to a bank to get this mortgage finally, it depends on your debt servicing capacity, you will get an instalment and depending on the instalment they will probably not lend you more than 40 per cent of—that instalment must not represent more than 40 per cent of your income.

So, therefore, if you are able to save money, that means you could borrow a little bit less, and if you could borrow a little bit less, it means your qualifying income to qualify for the mortgage is that much less. And, therefore, people who then are low-income earners who have to qualify for the mortgage—because this is a mortgage that you are going to get—these are people who are—and what this

amendment—this small amendment—is attempting to do is to facilitate those individuals to save. And therefore, Madam President, there is nothing wrong with this Bill as presented, and the amendments being put forward. It is, indeed, a good thing that the Government is helping to facilitate a savings habit in the country. It is allowing individuals to borrow less money and, therefore, by extension, pay more, and it also allows for them to better qualify for that mortgage, instead of when you are being called for the mortgage, you realize that you “doh” qualify.

So this Bill stands by itself, is great. It is a good thing. It is a simple thing, and let us not try to complicate it with a lot of jargon and a lot of things that are frivolous to the Bill. Now, you heard our colleague, Sen. Obika, spoke about—he went on and he pulled regulations and he talked about—let me say that again, just not to be deceived, or to keep focus. When we talk about there are no regulations for the HDC tax free housing bond, no regulations as yet. What you are talking about, there are Regulations for Government Savings Bond; there are Regulations for the Tax Free Savings Bonds and there are Regulations for the Tax Free Housing Bonds. There are no regulations for this. So, again, people reading from papers and talking about regulations and so forth, that is not—we do not have. Regulations will be produced on these particular bonds when that time comes.

Madam President, you know, again, I promised not to be long, you know, because again, I just want to be very focused on what this Bill and—what it attempts to do. You know, people talk about—the truth of the matter is we have a situation. We have a housing deficit. You have to deal with the housing deficit. All right? At the end of the day, if wishes were horses then beggars would ride. You understand? You cannot just wish the problem away. You have to deal with the problem in a particular and structured manner.

So at the end of the day, you know, you could then—let us be clear. How do

you get money? How does any agency get money? To fix the problem, yes, you have to make the agencies more efficient and you have to try to do more with less, and, clearly, this Government has demonstrated, through all the projects that we have gotten, or ongoing, that we understand the concept of doing more with less. So you cannot fault us for that. We have demonstrated that time and time, and time again, projects after projects. But at the end of the day you have to decide how you are going to get money to fix this problem of housing. Listen, you get money—or any agency, how you get money? You get money through budget allocations. You get money through savings, or you get money through borrowings. That is the way you get money. When you talk about getting money through budgetary allocations, we all know the situation where we are. More money for some requires less money for others, and therefore, if you are looking—and especially budgetary allocations have to also deal with the income that you presently have. So if your income has now dropped, as we have heard before, we are no longer getting income of \$58 billion. We are only getting income of \$35 billion, \$40 billion, then you have to be in a position whereby if you are only looking for budgetary allocations to get the money, then the amount of money that you could get will be a lot less to deal with the situation that you have, the same problem that we have out there that everyone talks about.

Well, Madam President, you normally get money from savings, and I mean, it would have been nice. How a country gets money from savings is when you have money, you save. We know in this country, however, when we had lots of money, income of \$58 billion, rather than trying to save, what we did was spend money of \$63 billion. So we have been running deficit budgets for a long time.  
[*Interruption*]

So when, as I said—my colleague is saying and adding, when we had

revenue in those days of \$58 billion we did not save anything, you know.

**Sen. Gopee-Scoon:** Nothing.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** We did not save. As a matter of fact, we then spent \$63 billion and we also depleted all the savings in a number of our institutions where we had money saved. [*Crosstalk*]

**Madam President:** Minister, please. Sen. Ameen, Sen. Hosein, please, I am hearing everything that you are saying so you are disturbing me. Minister, please continue.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** Thank you very much for the protection. I do not know why, when I say these things very simply and succinct, it always seems to get—[*Crosstalk*]

**Madam President:** Minister. Senators, this is the second warning. Continue, Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** It always seems to get people upset. I do not understand. There is nothing to be upset. The reality—and let the country know and we continue to say—is that we had budgets, we had revenue—fact—of \$58 billion. That is a fact. It is there. The truth is, you spent \$63 billion at those times. That is a fact. You did not save anything from the 58. You spent more.

**Madam President:** Minister, you have made this point, I think, more than once, so you need to move on and to be relevant to the matter at hand, please. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. The Hon. R. Le Hunte:** Thank you very much. So, Madam President, I was just going through as to the different ways in which a country would have been—because there was the conversation about the bond and I was just going through the fact of where you get money—with regard to how you get money: budgetary allocation; savings. I reached the point of savings, which we do not have at this

point, and the other avenue where you raise money, where you get money is via borrowings and this is exactly—we are borrowing money to be put into the housing and development market.

So, Madam President, you know, at the end of the day, as I said, this Bill before us is a very simple one. It is about one, two, three, four, five clauses—very simple. Let us not try to complicate matters and let us not try to bring in things that are not there in the Bill. The Bill—we know the situation that presently prevails. It is not a fact and it will continue to be said that the HDC, as an institution, has been building houses. They have built houses and delivered houses in 2016; they have built houses in 2017; they have built houses in 2018 and they will continue to build houses, and they will build houses in 2019 and going forward, in 2020 and 2021 under the guise of a PNM Government. So we know that is what is going to happen. So this is not about that. You know, as to the different types of houses that they should get involved in, yes, I agree 100 per cent. The HDC needs to get into some houses that, you know, more rent-to-own facilities and they need to focus their suite of houses, and they are doing exactly that. Right. And they are looking at all different—because you have different segments of the market to satisfy, and they are doing exactly that in the suite of houses.

I heard the suggestion about something for the retirees. And you know what? I consider that a suggestion worthy of consideration. So I agree, there is a lot to be done with housing in Trinidad and Tobago, and the HDC, being mindful and under the stewardship of this Government, and doing more with less, is addressing those issues. All right? So let us not go off on a tangent. Let us keep focused on the Bill before us. And as I said before, without this Bill—and I ask, without these amendments, will life be better for the individuals or be worse? And I think we

will all agree that this Bill puts us in a better position, or puts lots of individuals, as I have demonstrated, in a better position to save for their homes and to achieve that ultimate goal that all individuals—

So with those few words, Madam President, as I said, I will not stay here and try to get into Sen. Obika's bantering and carrying us all over the place, only to say, again, that the regulations for this particular bond has not been issued. Four and a half per cent savings rate to help stimulate and augment in this particular bond—4½ per cent is almost 400 per cent better than what the person is going to get if they do not do anything—400 per cent better. And there is no way if I am doing something to encourage and giving a benefit that is over 400 per cent better than your next best alternative, that you could sit there and honestly tell me that I do not care about the people, and this is not for them and this is not for this, and all of that.

So, Madam President, I support these amendments 100 per cent. I support them and I will hope that good sense will prevail and we will deal with the issues before us. Deal with the Bill that is before us and let us stop, please, trying to make these short political points by making jabs where they are not relevant, whatsoever. With those few words, Madam President, I lend my support again for this Bill. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Sen. Haynes.

**Sen. Anita Haynes:** Thank you, Madam President. It is my pleasure to join in this debate on the Government Savings Bonds (Amdt.) Bill, 2019, and I would like to beg your indulgence for just two minutes as I start my contribution, to acknowledge an event that happened today, September 25<sup>th</sup>. As many of us would know, this week is Global Climate Strike Action, and today was Climate Strike TT which took place around the Queen's Park Savannah. I was unable to attend



because of my obligations here, but I promised that I would use my platform to raise further awareness for those who are working in the advocacy on environmental change [*Desk thumping*] and environmental issues in Trinidad and Tobago. And because it will remain top priority as part of the UNC's policies for 2020, I want to assure them that we are looking on and we are on their side. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam President, as I get into the substance of this debate, I have a number of notes from Minister Le Hunte's contribution on this short Bill. The Minister urged us to focus, and focus on the issues at hand, and I took particular notice as to what the Minister focused on himself. You see, the Minister kept going on and on that this is a way to help you save. This bond is a savings bond. It will help you save and he—the Minister—did not take on any bits on the housing aspect, because I think he well knows that they cannot deliver on housing, so he focused very clearly on savings. And as I prepared for the debate, I asked myself: What is the problem to be solved? And Minister Le Hunte said this Bill will deal with a particular issue, and then never went on to talk about what the issue was. Then the Minister said—

**Madam President:** Sen. Haynes, if I could just point out, it is the Minister of Public Utilities when you are referring to him.

**Sen. A. Haynes:** I have to use the full title?

**Madam President:** Yes.

**Sen. A. Haynes:** No problem. The Minister of Public Utilities—thank you, Madam President, for your guidance. The Minister of Public Utilities went on to mention that there is a long waiting line, and that was a sentiment that was first brought by the Minister of Public Administration as she piloted the Bill. And the Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance said that this Bill

was meant to achieve the policy objective, which is homeownership in the shortest possible time and in the shortest possible time frame. Now, Madam President, you see what is going on here, it is very clear what the Government is attempting to do, and I would reference a number of newspaper articles to make my point that what the Government is selling to the people of Trinidad and Tobago are not just bonds but dreams. They are selling dreams to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*]

You see—and I want to urge the Government not to trifle with people’s emotions, eh. Homeownership—there is an emotional connection to owning your own home. It is more than just a financial investment. It is a thing that persons work their entire lives for. They would probably attempt to save. They would try to figure out ways. But homeownership has an emotional investment and connection to it, and to come here and talk about housing bonds and talk about it being able to help you access homeownership in the shortest possible time frame, when providing no details on how you intend to do so, is selling the population dreams and, quite frankly, it is a very callous approach to this debate. Because you are coming here and telling us that these bonds will help you own a home but never saying how. And I will get into that, Madam President, but I want to contextualize where this came from.

So I went to—now, this housing bond issue, most remember it from the 2019 fiscal presentation by Minister Imbert. But I do not know how many of us remember that it was actually first mentioned—Minister of Finance, sorry—in fiscal 2017. And I want to quote here. The Minister in that budget presentation says this is:

“...an encouragement to persons to save for specific purposes, we also intend to introduce in 2017 attractive Housing Bonds, specifically linked to

the purchase of housing accommodation, and Education Bonds linked to education expenses.”

2017, 2018, 2019. Now, in 2019, Minister Imbert said—the Minister of Finance said with respect to this very same housing bond that we are now debating mere days before the Minister presents yet another budget, the Minister of Finance said that they would present this housing bond, and I want to quote this line in particular:

“However, simply put, the intention is that the citizens who invest in housing bonds will be given preference in the allocation of new HDC housing...”—which will be assigned to—“...the full value of their bonds to the Government in order to reduce the purchase price of their housing units.”

Now, Madam President, this is where we start to have a number of questions. But before I get into that—because what I did is, I pulled all of the budget statements by the Minister and I looked at all of the aspects where the Minister of Finance spoke about housing, and there are a couple of interesting facts. The entire first two paragraphs are repeated annually, so I can almost tell you what will be said on October 7<sup>th</sup> in the first part under “Housing”. But plagiarizing yourself aside, I would go on. The Minister of Finance in 2018 said—and this is a direct quote from that budget:

“However...with the best will in the world and all available financial and human resources, the HDC can construct, at most, 2,000...houses per year, which means that with the current arrangements, the waiting list will never be fully satisfied.”

Now, I remember seeing on TV, Minister Imbert asking if we thought—the Minister of Finance asking if we thought he was a magician and if he is a wizard. Because, cut to fiscal 2019, same Minister promised to deliver 6,000 housing units

by the year 2020 and to deliver 3,000 units annually, by magic. It has to be. It has to be by magic, because—you see, that is why I said what they are trying to do is trifle with the emotions of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, because housing is a key issue in Trinidad and Tobago. You have to be living under a rock to not know that. But it is also an issue that motivates voters, because if you feel that the likelihood of getting a house is within your reach and you really believe that, you may say, “I will throw my support behind the people that is promising me this”, not knowing, Madam President, in the absence of all details it is a dream that the PNM is trying to sell them one year before an election, [*Desk thumping*]*—*one year before facing the polls.

I will go on now, Madam President, to some of the articles that I pulled when the Minister of Finance was talking about the housing bond. And I want to just quote two things here, because I want to show you and the population at large that this entire thing, and the timing of it—because bearing in mind it was promised since 2017 and not delivered. So the timing of the delivery is also essential. Speaking at a Post Cabinet press briefing—this is from a *Loop TT* article by Darlisa Ghouralal on May 02, 2019—the Minister referred to the housing bond “as a tremendous game changer”. Now, we know what happens with the Minister and game changers, right? There were six, now there are, how many? Zero?

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Game over.

**Sen. A. Haynes:** Game over—and that it would change “the construction sector and home-ownership in”—Trinidad and Tobago.

Again, this is being billed as a path to homeownership. No details on how. All they are telling you, Madam President, is if you buy the bond, you would now be able to have preferential access. And that took me to the article on August 23<sup>rd</sup> in the Trinidad and Tobago *Newsday* by Carla Bridglal, and the Minister said

then—sorry, August 23, 2018, the Minister of Finance said:

“The logistics haven’t been worked out yet, but Imbert proposed an initial \$1.5 billion in housing bonds—”

[*Interruption*] I am quoting from the article.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Do not be distracted, she is not contributing.

**Sen. A. Haynes:** Yes, thank you. You were not paying attention—

“...but Imbert proposed an initial \$1.5 billion in housing bonds that will have a government guarantee. After that, the bonds will be guaranteed by mortgage payments for the houses. People who invested in the bonds will also have a special window into the acquisition of HDC houses.”

And I would like to ask the Minister in the Ministry of Finance and the Minister of Public Administration in her wrap up, to tell us more about this special window for the access to HDC housing, because in the reading of it—and nobody is telling us—is it that if you—because the Minister of Public Utilities made the point over and over that there is this long waiting list. And so, is it that this Bill, this Government Savings Bonds, is targeted at persons who already have HDC applications in, and therefore whatever money you have in the bank, in order to access this special window, you take it out and you buy Government savings bonds to get this special window to be accelerated on the list? Or if you never applied for HDC before—you have never applied because, honestly, for persons in my year-group, just do not bother because what is the point of going on a 30-year waiting list. It does not make sense to put in your application because the horror stories are too many.

Well, now you say, “Ah ha, ah have a lil chance”. So I take my savings, I buy the bond, apply for HDC and now I get special acceleration. You see, those are important questions for you to answer in the details on how you intend to run this

programme. And I noted that Minister Le Hunte was talking about—Minister of Public Utilities—was talking about, let us keep focused and there are no regulations yet, et cetera. You know, the comfort level that the Ministers come here with in an absence of any detail is, quite frankly, appalling. He is so comfortable that the population must say, “Hear what, we giving all yuh ah lil bligh here”. “Yuh getting ah bond. Take it. Doh ask too many questions. Doh worry bout de housing thing. Doh worry dat we eh really build no houses. Eventually we will sort all ah dat out and yuh will get ah house.” Trust us on that.

Madam President, we must have trust issues. As a nation we must have trust issues with this Government. [*Desk thumping*] I mean, I definitely have trust issues. Because I want to go to a question I asked in this Parliament on June 24, 2019, and the question was posed to the Minister of Housing on the now famous CGG contract between HDC and the Chinese group.

**4.15 p.m.**

And I want to go—because I asked a very specific question, which was the commencement date for the housing in San Fernando, the commencement date for the housing. So that is 235 housing units promised in Lady Hailes Avenue, San Fernando, and 204 promised in Port of Spain. The Minister at the time—this is June 24<sup>th</sup> this year—extraordinarily confident. If you heard him you are sure you are getting a house just now in Lady Hailes when the Minister answered the question, because the Minister said, in response to one of our supplemental questions, that all that they were waiting on was the statutory approvals that are required.

Madam President, this is a quote from the Minister:

“Madam President...statutory approvals”—from—“T&TEC, WASA, sewer designs and buildings. Those are the statutory approvals...required in most

constructions”—and—“they are in the process of being approved right now.”

So we ask now when will the construction commence? The Minister responded by saying, “We are far advanced in the process right now. I cannot pinpoint an exact time”—but we are far advanced in the process right now. June 24, 2019, cut to September 25<sup>th</sup>, same 2019, “all dem houses gone”. So the same people that are telling you that a bond and not the construction of homes eh—because what they are trying to convince us is this bond will help you access homeownership. You know what is the simple thing, Minister? If you built more homes, more people will be able to access homes. [*Desk thumping*] So it cannot be the bond will lead you into becoming a homeowner in the shortest possible time. It is for you to do the work that you promised the people of Trinidad and Tobago that you would do.

Now, Madam President, I saw the Minister of Finance speak about young families and who would be able to access, and Sen. Obika in his contribution made the point as to whether or not you can even access a mortgage, and I think that the realities of the situation facing a number of Trinidadians and Tobagonians are being deliberately excluded from this discussion. And as I looked at the housing bond and the savings bonds as it was presented—and everybody again is saying these are to fix the issues—the question I asked was the inclusivity of access. Because if the problem you are trying to solve is housing access and all categories of citizens who are excluded from buying houses on the regular market price—so I am talking about those of us who—you may be working. I want to make a very specific example here. You have a number of young professionals coming into the world of work and facing a reality where what—now I am talking about persons with bachelor degrees, master degrees, et cetera—is facing you is a career as a contract worker.

So you are a serial contract worker, Madam President. You cannot qualify for a mortgage. Anybody could tell you that. We do not qualify, and therefore, even if you were to again get your housing bond, et cetera, and you think “ah ha” now is any my shot, the Government needs to be upfront and honest with people who are on contract. As I was preparing I went to the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development’s website and—I will do some free advertising for you all here—on October 5<sup>th</sup> in Hilton, of all places—[*Interruption*]

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Where the pool—

**Sen. A. Haynes:** Probably next to the pool—the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development will be hosting an expo, and I saw a tagline—and again and this is why I am telling you they are selling people dreams and they do not care about the emotional investment people have towards housing. The tagline is “Own a home before 30”; that they are going to give you advice on how to own homes before you turn 30.

This Government, Madam President, under their tenure, at the last statistics we were able to collect, youth unemployment is at its highest in this country and they are going to look at the same youth, [*Desk thumping*] the same people with no job now and tell us how—[*Interruption*]

**Madam President:** Sen. Haynes, I just want to caution you a little bit. You need to be a little more focused on the Bill that is before us. Okay?

**Sen. A. Haynes:** Thank you, Madam President. I am discussing the policy consideration.

**Madam President:** No need to explain to me what you are discussing. I am following.

**Sen. A. Haynes:** No problem. And I make the point, Madam President, because, again, how are you able to access the savings bonds if you have no job? What



money are you using to buy the bonds?

**Madam President:** Sen. Haynes, what I need to point out to you is that different words, but you are saying a lot of what Sen. Obika has already presented. So you need to try and get to the Bill without being repetitive.

**Sen. A. Haynes:** Thank you, Madam President. The point is on the housing policy because the Minister of Public Administration and the Minister in the Ministry of Finance stated very explicitly that this Bill is designed to meet the policy objectives for affordable housing in Trinidad and Tobago. So I do believe that we have to discuss what the policy objectives the Government intend to meet are.

I want to go back to the question of whether or not we can trust anything this Government has to say and I go back now to the Minister of Finance's fiscal presentation for fiscal 2018, and I think it is very important for us to listen to what the Minister said then because the question is whether or not they have even ever outlined what the policy objectives in terms of housing is. Because in 2018, the Minister of Finance said very specifically here, and this is from the Budget Statement, at page 27 of the Budget Statement, and I quote:

“...the greatest demand at the lowest end of the scale for rental accommodation or rent-to-own arrangement where a portion of the rent is allocated to the eventual purchase over time of the unit”—that is the—  
“market”—and—“this is where the Government”—needs to—“focus its efforts.

...the HDC has been constrained over the”—number of—“years...”—to—  
“make”—it—“available.”

And then the Minister says here:

Therefore: “...the Government intends to shift the HDC's focus away

from...middle and upper income construction market and...return the HDC to its original moorings to provide...housing for lower and lower-middle income families with an emphasis on rental accommodation.”

Now, if that is the stated policy by the Minister of Finance who moved this Bill, and both in the presentation in the Lower House and in the Upper House stated that this Bill is intended to meet the policy objectives as articulated by the Government, I do not see how, Madam President. It is a complete disconnect. So the question becomes do you even know what your policy objectives are? So therefore, do you have any idea which problem you are trying to fix? Do you have any clue what you are doing as you bring these Bills in front of us? And again, tell us that housing bonds would lead to owning a home.

I want to go very quickly, Madam President, to the question of accomplishments, and that is where a number of citizens would really house the confidence level in terms of things like the saving bonds. I looked at the HDC's website in terms of what—because the Bill says, well not the Bill, the Ministers in their contributions said that it would allow you to access new HDC developments. So I wanted to see what HDC developments this Government is currently working on. Now, all Governments need to continue the work done by previous administrations, however, everything that is on the website seems to be things that would have started prior to this Government coming into office. So a little detail is important here. If it is that we, those of us who subscribed to the bond, who followed the Minister's advice, banker as he is, to suggest that we must save our money and save towards this goal, which development will we be saving to? Can I go on the HDC's website and say, “Hey, when I put aside my \$25,000 I could look forward to one of these here, or I could look forward to living in St. James by the end of 2019”?”—because remember, it is 6,000 houses going to be constructed

between now and 2020 according to their statistics. Can I go on the HDC's website and say, "Yes, dream home coming soon"?

You see, Madam President, none of them can tell us, with any kind of measure of genuine comfort to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that once you take this housing bond, this savings bond, that this is where your home is going to be located, this is what you are saving towards. Because the Minister told us over and over in his contribution that we should save towards something. Well show us, Minister? Show us what we would be saving towards. Show us the houses that you are building [*Desk thumping*] because at it stands now it is a phantom, it is a ghost because now the Minister of Finance who told us that the HDC cannot under the best circumstances, construct over 2,000 homes per year, is now promising us 3,000 homes annually after the election, but re-elect us and I promise you, you will get 3,000 per year. "Aint" build a home yet, Madam President.

Madam President, as I close, I want to say again that the issue of homeownership and housing is not something that any Government should trifle with. It is not something to be taken lightly, and it is not something that you promise people knowing that you cannot deliver. When you talk about families and you talk about shelter it is serious business, and this Government has no track record of delivery at all. And so, as we stand here, and Members of the Government come time and time again to tell us that this Bill will help reduce the numbers on the HDC list, that now it is at 175,000 and this will help, they must know that they are not talking the truth, that they are not telling us anything that we can believe. Because how, how is it going to reduce the numbers on the list?

And so, I urge the Government to be very responsible when you are talking to people about housing. Be very responsible and be aware that you are talking to people about life savings, about lifetime investment, and something they worked

towards for their entire life. And if you know you cannot deliver—because we know you cannot deliver—call elections and allow people who can deliver housing to do so for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, at this juncture we will suspend the sitting and return at 5.00 p.m. When we return Sen. Dillon-Remy will begin her contribution. So we are suspended until 5.00 p.m.

**4.28 p.m.:** *Sitting suspended.*

**5.00 p.m.:** *Sitting resumed.*

[MR. VICE-PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Dillon-Remy.

**Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for allowing me to contribute to the debate on the Government Savings Bonds (Amdt.) Bill, 2019. I must commend the Government for seeking to amend the Government Savings Bonds Act, Chap. 71:41, to make provisions for tax free Government Savings Bonds to be issued in respect of the purchase of Housing Development Corporation to increase the total value of bonds issued under the Act. A lot of persons who went before spoke about the importance of housing for the population, and I too am very pleased that an effort is being made to ensure that the population in need gets affordable housing. So I support the Government's endeavour to make sure that the funding is available for that purpose.

My contribution, however, Mr. Vice-President, must point out the gross discrepancy that exists between what we are asked to provide here today for the HDC to have funds available to provide for houses for persons, well under the housing development—under the HDC funding available to provide houses available for persons living in Trinidad. Clause 4 of the Bill states that the Bill would amend section 3 of the Act to increase the total value of bonds that can be

issued under the Act from \$2 billion to \$3 billion.

Mr. Vice-President, the situation in Tobago is this. Minister Le Hunte, when he made his contribution he talked about the three ways in which Government can get funding for housing, he talked about the *Public Sector Investment Programme*, he talked about savings and bonds. What is available right now to the people of Tobago, through the Tobago House of Assembly, the PSIP—what is given by the Government *Public Sector Investment Programme*—and I would just like to point out that in fiscal year 2018 the Government provided to the Tobago House of Assembly for housing \$36.7 million, and that was to develop new housing settlements and for the refurbishment of existing housing units. It said that the Division of Settlements will continue to provide improvement grants and subsidies, and will undertake works pertaining to the following projects and he mentioned the projects: Signal Hill Housing Estate, Courland Estate land development, land development for Adelphi Estate, Chevron land development, and Friendship land development. Again in fiscal 2019, through the PSIP, \$18 million was provided for the Tobago House of Assembly to maintain and increase the housing infrastructure on developed land to provide affordable housing, again in different areas.

Mr. Vice-President, we are talking about \$51 million being provided to the people of Tobago over the last two fiscal years for housing development.

I refer to a *Guardian* newspaper article of August the 29<sup>th</sup> where it was reported that the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago, UDeCOTT, has cleared the air on construction work to the Prime Minister's official residence in Blenheim, saying that the refurbishment will cost \$18 million. I quote this article only to mention that the HDC in building one home in Tobago at that cost, when the same amount was given to Tobago House of Assembly for

housing development for all of Tobago for the PSIP. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President, it is known that the cost of building in Tobago is at least 33 per cent, but some people are saying 40 per cent more than making a building in Trinidad, and according to the Central Bank the average cost of a home in Trinidad and Tobago is about \$1.1 million. Information coming from the Division of Settlements of the Tobago House of Assembly indicates that there is a list of applications for about 7,000 homes for people in Tobago, and we also know they are saying that they have two additional properties for development, that is, Adelphi Estate 48.73 acres, and Riseland 8.57 acres. They need the resources for those developments.

The *Vision 2020* estimates for housing demands in Tobago from 2000 to 2020, is 6,868 homes at an annual rate of 686 per year. The THA is far from providing anything like those numbers. So my question is to the Minister of Finance: How does this what we are doing here today in allowing increased funding to be available to HDC for building homes in Trinidad, how does that impact on the provision of homes that are greatly needed for the people of Tobago? We do know that the difference between what is provided and what is required every year causes the demand to increase.

In consideration of Article 11 of the Second Wave of the International Human Rights in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Article 11 states:

“The States Parties to the present Covenant recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for himself and his family, including adequate food, clothing and housing, and to the continuous improvement of living conditions. The States Parties will take appropriate steps to ensure the realization of this right, recognizing to this effect the essential importance of

international co-operation based on free consent.”

Now, I am accepting the Government’s position that it is seeking to bridge the gap, but my simple point is this, Mr. Vice-President. We are living in a twin island state, provisions are being provided right now for the increased provisions of housing for Trinidad through the HDC, there is a significant underfunding for provision of houses through the Tobago House of Assembly *Public Sector Investment Programme*, and my question to the Minister is: As we consider this important Bill can we ensure that just as you are providing adequate funding for the HDC for its mandate that consideration be given to providing appropriate allocation to the House of Assembly that has been woefully underfunded over the years for building homes, for the growing population in Tobago? In this regard, we preserve the right to affordable housing on both sides of the water. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Acting Leader of Government Business.

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Mr. Vice-President, thank you for the opportunity to speak very briefly on this Bill, and hopefully to my friends on the other side in front of me who are coming, they would be able to spend even less time than I would. Mr. Vice-President, I have followed the debate and I intended by opening with an apology, on behalf of the Opposition, for keeping us here for so long—I know that they have their jobs to do—talking about things, yet again, that are not in the Bill.

**Sen. Ameen:** “Doh” ask no questions?

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** You are not asking questions. You are wasting time. [*Desk thumping*] This is a very simple—this is not house distribution. This is not selection of sites for construction. This is a simple amendment to a 1962 piece of legislation. I would like to know, and I am sure the country would like to

know, let us look at clause 2 of the Bill because none of you all have referred to clause 2. Clause 2 of the Bill seeks to define the word “Act”, because in the 1962 legislation and the amendments which follow thereafter the word “Act” was not defined. So where it is the word “Act” is used throughout the 1962 legislation, some people—maybe the Members of the Opposition may be confused and they want to know what Act is this “Act” referring to.

So clause 2, seeks to include a definition which says:

“In this Act, the ‘Act’ means the Government Savings Bonds Act.”

And that will help my friends navigate because this Bill seeks to amend the Government Savings Bonds Act; as simple as that. Clause 3. I cannot remember any of you speaking about clause 3. But why do we need clause 3? Clause 3 of the Bill seeks to insert a new section 2B. So if you read that clause 2B is being inserted you know there is a 2A, but none of you have addressed your mind to 2A. Section 2A of the Act, which is the Government Savings Bonds Act, says when you look—[*Interruption*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Members, I am hearing crosstalk getting a little bit louder as the Minister is making his contribution. So could we just please have some silence while he continues. Continue, Minister.

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. If you had addressed your minds to 2A, 2A is very restricted. It says:

“The proceeds of the sale of tax free housing bonds issued under this Act shall be applied solely for the provision of mortgages to individuals for the purchase of houses where the cost of construction together with the cost of land does not exceed two hundred and fifty thousand...”

That is 2A, and 2A is restrictive. You understand that now? Because the proceeds of the tax free housing bonds under 2A would be applied solely for the provision of



mortgages, and I will come to Sen. Obika and his confusion with mortgages and mortgage backed securities and all of that.

So 2B, what does 2B do? You keep saying—Sen. Obika talked about this is not going to HDC, this is not going to housing. Well I could understand his confusion and I could understand your confusion because you did not read it, 2B, which is being inserted after 2A. But if you address your mind to the Bill and 2B, all the mysteries are revealed right there. 2B reads:

“Notwithstanding...2A”—in other words, notwithstanding that restrictive provision in 2A—“the proceeds of the sale of tax free Housing Development Corporation Housing Bonds...under this Act shall be applied solely for the...of houses from the”—HDC—“by individuals.”

Now having read that, why does that leave you in doubt that the proceeds are meant to fund the purchase of HDC?

What public policy? What policy document will help you to understand that? That the people who save, the people who use the bonds as a form of savings, can use that down the road solely—solely, I do not think you have a problem understanding that English word—for the purpose of the purchase of houses from the HDC. So I cannot understand the mystery of what people are trying to do. It is there in 2B.

**5.15 p.m.**

None of you have addressed your mind to clause 4, section 3. I did not hear you say anything about it. The Bill in clause 4 seeks to amend section 3 of the parent Act to introduce some language but more importantly, to raise the ceiling; the ceiling, in respect of which bonds could be issued under the legislation and nothing is strange about that. In 2016, this Government and that Minister of Finance in Act No. 10 of 2016, raised the ceiling from \$300 million to \$2 billion

and to accommodate this present or proposed programme, the ceiling is being raised from \$2 billion to \$3 billion, and then lastly, we have the Schedule to the Act is being amended. I do not remember anybody addressing their minds to that or talking that. Do you have a problem with it? You should not. This only came in the legislation in 2016. Again, Act No. 10 of 2016, this Schedule was introduced and all the Minister of Finance is saying is “I want to insert a specific reference to tax-free Housing Development Corporation Bonds in the Schedule”. If you had read that, then you would have fully and properly understood, that what this Bill seeks to do, is to amend this 1962 legislation to accommodate this opportunity for members of the public, through a form of savings, to save via housing bonds to be used down the road for purchase of houses provided by HDC.

I am sorry that you misunderstood, you were misdirected, you misinformed yourselves, but I am happy to assist you in understanding what this Bill about. Because I listened to my friend Sen. Haynes, and between Sen. Haynes and Sen. Obika, they covered every newspaper article except the *Sunday Punch*, but “ah think the *Punch* outta circulation”. Sen. Haynes, you made excessive use of the *Trinidad Guardian* but as I say, you have the amazing ability to speak about what is not important. Well this is what is important to me because this is the *Trinidad Guardian*. I do not quote the articles often but this would have helped you understand why the Government is doing what it is doing because you wanted to know why we said we were doing this in 2017 and in 2019, “we not here”.

But in *Guardian*, Saturday, September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2016, under the caption “Bring back savings bonds”. The *Guardian* opened with this and this is an editorial:

“In delivering the 2015 budget...”

So that would have been delivered in 2014.

“former Minister of Finance Larry Howai said that the Government...”

Your Government.

“proposed to reintroduce savings bonds, which were ‘once an important investment instrument in T&T contributing to the funding of government services.’”

Three paragraphs down, the *Guardian* says this and I quote:

“Unfortunately, for reasons that have never been explained, this proposal was not implemented by the previous administration.”

It goes on to say:

“But the idea of tax-deductible savings bonds—or even savings bonds that are linked to the rate of inflation—is one to which current Minister of Finance Colm Imbert, should give serious consideration, especially if he introduces amendments to the original proposal that enhance the attractiveness of the bonds.”

And finally, it goes on to say in the next paragraph:

“The main reason why the reintroduction of tax-deductible savings bonds would be extremely beneficial for many middle-income households throughout the country is that there has been a dearth of TT-dollar investments earning competitive returns for many years.”

End of quote. What I am helping you to understand is that you having promised the reintroduction of tax-free savings bonds, we are assisting you, because as the *Guardian* pointed out, you were unable to implement it and all we have asked you today is to help us to help you [*Laughter and crosstalk*] because we all recognize that in the current investment climate, the need to introduce measures, and attractive measures, to encourage savings have existed and you promised that you will do something and we promised that we will do your something plus. So what we have done is not only to propose the reintroduction of savings bonds but to

create a saving bond that is linked to savings for housing provided by the HDC. And what could be so—what is there to argue about? Sen. Haynes, you would have been able to join the young people by the Savannah since 1.35 p.m. [*Crosstalk*] What is there to argue about? This is not about building homes.

And then I come to Sen. Obika. Sen. Obika, who—[*Interruption*]

**Sen. Ameen:** “Talk about the Bill nah.”

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** The Bill is four clauses. I come to Sen. Obika, and Sen. Obika asked the question about “mortgage-backed security”, “the security for the bonds”, “what the Government going to do with the money”. Now, this is an Act to amend the Government Savings Bonds Act, 1962. If you had read the 1962 Act, you would have understood that this is not a bond that is backed by an asset. This is not a bond in that form. This is not a bond that is meant to fund mortgages. And that is why we had to introduce 2B following 2A. This is a bond that is on the one hand, meant to encourage savings but on the other hand, meant to fund the same houses that you say you want us to build. And if you had looked at the legislation, the parent legislation, you would have learnt that bonds issued under this legislation—and I will point you to the source of funding which is the Consolidated Fund. So the payment of the principal by law and the interest on these bonds is the Consolidated Fund.

So there are no mortgage proceeds to fund repayment to the bondholders. There are no mortgage proceeds to fund interest payments. There are no physical assets to which these bonds are linked. There is nothing like that. There is no cash flow, you are not looking for cash flow to fund. Your bond payment and your interest payment—by law, bonds of this nature issued under this legislation are backed by the Consolidated Fund. It is a charge on the Consolidated Fund and we know charges on the Consolidated Fund, by law, are taken off the top and that

protects the persons who are holders of bonds and it also protects those who have interest payments to receive from bonds.

So, Mr. Vice-President, these are four or five simple amendments. It is meant to allow something like this, specific purpose housing bond to be issued, primarily through the amendment to include 2B so that we are not restricted by 2A and the bonds can be issued and the bondholders can use it as a form of savings towards a purchase of a HDC house and the HDC can use the proceeds to be able to construct more houses and the repayment of the bonds come from the Consolidated Fund under the Act.

I thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Rishi Tripathi:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. It is an indeed an honour to stand before this House and contribute to the debate on an Act to amend the Government Savings Bonds Act, Chap. 71:41. But before going into this matter at hand, I must convene my sincere gratitude and appreciation to the hon. Leader of the Opposition for this tremendous privilege and opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President, I would like to use this opportunity to also thank colleagues on all sides and members of the Senate staff for the warm welcome that I received. [*Desk thumping*] And I am also proud to say and to be a part of such a young vibrant Opposition Bench today and I think our average age, if my maths is correct, is around 32 [*Desk thumping*] so that is a step in the right direction.

Mr. Vice President, I heard this Bill being referred to as short and in other places, as a billion-dollar piece of paper and both descriptions are actually true. Despite the amendments being short, there is much to discuss and quite a few issues at hand that I would like to raise today. This housing bond, being the third being introduced by this Government since entering into office since 2015, for the most part, I find to be a decent initiative but there are questions that need to be

answered. My colleagues and I on this side of the Bench are of the opinion that any legislation and initiative that seeks to engage such a large sector of the population in a positive way is something good, but again, I mention and I reiterate that we have some serious concerns.

We have always been about supporting good law, Mr. Vice-President and I emphasize, good law. There are many instances, however, especially in recent times, where the Government has put the cart before the horse and as a result, we have not gone very far. Being the prudent attorney as I am or at least I try to be, I try to keep abreast of the updates and laws that come before both Houses as required by our Legal Profession Act, as most attorneys in this House would be aware of. In recent times, I have seen situations like with the local government proposed reforms which seem to me to be another case of putting the cart before the horse. Many provisions, new initiatives but not enough groundwork, not enough financial framework and no funding to facilitate. And similarly, we saw this same trend with the licensing committee provisions that came before this House and eventually lapsed. Any attorney practising can attest the licensing woes at the various Magistrates' Courts that still exist even after the Act was passed. When the groundwork is not done, we unfortunately bear force ripe and premature legislation.

Mr. Vice-President, we as a Parliament must legislate hand-in-hand with the proper homework being done to ensure the efficiency of the legislation or we run the risk of over-legislating and un-enforcing which is something plaguing our nation in my respectful view. Mr. Vice-President, I say this because when we look at this amendment, I try to put myself in the shoes of the citizens who this seeks to benefit or at the very least, affect. We must adopt a two-pronged approach: How do I feel about this initiative firstly as the target audience and secondly, as the rest

of the citizenry looking on who stand to bear the financial burden should this initiative collapse for whatever reason. Mr. Vice-President, we just heard that the Consolidated Fund would be backing these initiatives, these bonds. We are asking the taxpaying citizens to accept a further \$1 billion burden should this bond not be as successful as we are hoping. So it is indeed a very expensive piece of paper.

Mr. Vice-President, I am usually an optimist but lately the housing sector which directly ties to this Bill has raised many red flags and caused quite the public uproar. Anyone with even basic knowledge of investments, whether it be stocks, bonds, commodities or even crypto currency—the new kid on the block—will tell you that stability is the key to creating a climate conducive to this type of activity. In fact, one of my favourite shows on Netflix, *Billions* starring Paul Giamatti, in that show, you see very clearly how fragile investments are. Corruption, changes in board personnel, scandal, all affect public trust and confidence in a product and create a volatile market as seen in the show.

Mr. Vice-President, I can give a personal example as well. I have traded stocks or bonds but I may have dabbled in crypto currency a couple of years ago and Bitcoin and Ethereum started booming due to the ease of doing business and the freedom of cash transfers and then after a while, the public got wind that the US Government was possibly looking to regulate these crypto currencies and impose taxes and there was a huge market crash. In other words, people pulled their money out of the system as quickly as they could and then the prices plummeted. Nobody wants to invest in a system that is unstable. This situation is a bit different as the Government backs these transactions going back to my earlier point and looking at this from the position of the man on the street who this should affect the most. Yes, it can benefit persons who are interested in buying but it also can create great liability if not handled or regulated properly, which I believe to be

our job today in the Parliament.

In speaking of the benefits to the potential investor, one must face the harsh realities of our economy. The latest Central Bank report speaks to difficulties faced by the average citizen, the high cost of living, personal household indebtedness. It is no secret that our public taxation is high, gas prices are high, real estate prices are high. The amount of disposable income that a person can actually invest after paying their monthly obligations is at an all-time low. So here we are, Mr. Vice-President, telling Joe Public on the street, we know you want to invest into this bond scheme with a long-term goal of getting a home, take what precious little money that you have, your disposable income, every month, remove it from your rainy day savings and put it into the bond. Agreed, the Minister is promising a generous rate or at least, we will see in the regulations to come. But what does this mean for you with your small buy in considering that it is in furtherance of a HDC down payment in most cases? “Ah \$100, \$200?” And you are buying into a sector currently that is plagued with mass corruption, poor workmanship, contractors not being held responsible for the rush jobs that they partake in.

In recent times, Mr. Vice-President, we could remember Las Alturas, the Edinburgh 500 Towers which I pass every day in Chaguanas and recently, the CGGC failed contract and most recently, the Gomez Trace, Moruga HDC development that has been highlighted in the local media. Mr. Vice-President, the Leader of the Opposition spoke about this publicly, the situation at Moruga. When my colleagues and I visited this development, we were in shock. The poorest construction that I personally have seen in a long time. Basic amenities missing, no drainage, wiring issues, compromised emergency exits, leaking sewage and the complaints go on and on. Let us not talk about the change in purchase price which



is another issue that I will come back to. Mr. Vice-President, the relevance to all this is that these are the problems facing the housing right now and we are asking the public to invest into this. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Vice-President, another issue in Trinidad I have realized is that people look at these HDC homes as giveaways and people are paying their hard-earned dollars to buy these homes. And in what condition? How does this influence persons to invest and buy housing bonds knowing that this is the quality that they will get? What about our housing policy, Mr. Vice-President? I can say with certainty that the public's trust and confidence in the housing sector is at an all-time low. To make matters worse, no one can give a straight answer to this day or take responsibility for the downfall of the housing sector. Mr. Vice-President, we still cannot get a straight answer on the Chinese Gezhouba contract. The penalty I believe for that breach and termination, as publicized in the media, is roughly \$290 million and I stand to be corrected. That is over a quarter of the funding that we are seeking to finance at the moment with these public offerings by way of bonds. Mr. Vice-President, this point ties back in because this project was carded to provide, I believe, as my colleague said, 5,000 houses. How does this tie in to the HDC satisfying its mandate with persons who will buy bonds? What houses will be available? When and where will they be constructed? So many questions left unanswered.

Mr. Vice-President, so between the poor quality of construction over the years, houses built without statutory approvals, the housing sector being used at times as a political football rather than a social comfort, scandals and no accountability, would you or rather should you feel comfortable putting your last \$1,000 every month into a bond tied directly to public housing? [*Desk thumping*]  
Mr. Vice-President, the success of this amendment and the inclusion of housing

bonds into the Government Savings Bonds Act relies heavily on a stable housing sector.

Mr. Vice-President, as I move along, I heard that the Government seeks to introduce widespread marketing and education to inform the citizenry of these bonds and the process involved. I quote the hon. Minister of Finance from Friday the 20<sup>th</sup> September 2019 in the House of Representatives saying:

We are helping the little person.

“...this measure is designed to encourage the people to save...there is no...culture of savings...”—in this country.

I believe this help is long overdue.

Mr. Vice-President, I must say that personally I am happy to hear this. I wish it was done a long time ago before this was brought to Parliament so that we could have had more public engagement and public opinion into this process. After all, this is a measure proposed for the benefit of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice-President, I reinforce this call, our financial literacy and knowledge of the securities industry is severely lacking throughout Trinidad and Tobago. From time to time, we would hear in budget speeches if you listen carefully, you would hear these initiatives like public offerings and bonds similar to these and most of the people in our country sadly have no clue as to what it means. For a lot of the older folks, there is also a stigma attached to Government bonds, likely due to the eroded trust and confidence in the system. This educational initiative, in my humble view, will help deal with those fears. Mr. Vice-President, this ought to be done sooner rather than later, let all be involved in the process. We, as a country, have wide access to social media and the Government spends millions every year on advertising. Perhaps a social media campaign, Facebook or

YouTube videos can provide user-friendly information to help with the education process. The younger generation are becoming more involved in stocks, securities, commodity trading and you might be surprised how much of an impact this makes. Mr. Vice-President, another issue that jumps out in my respectful view is the equity of the housing allocation. I am concerned that persons who pay into this bond scheme may be given preferential treatment over others. We have all interacted with persons who are on the waiting list for 10 years, 15 years, even 20 years with the hope of owning something to pass on to their future generations. There is a bit of ambiguity with the connection of the HDC allocation system and this bond purchasing. How do these bond purchasers factor into that system with roughly 175,000 or 176,000, as the Minister said, persons awaiting allocation? Who gets to the front of the line and faster?

Mr. Vice-President, perhaps these bonds ought to have been categorized into several markets. Some available for persons under the age of 35 years perhaps, first-time homeowners, maybe those for the protective services, the pensioners. I believe hon. Sen. Teemal and Sen. Haynes mentioned this point as well. I am concerned with the equity of distribution and again, our housing policy needs to address this: 175,000 applicants, when and how do they get houses? How do we continue to engage the construction industry to build houses, to meet public demand, when, Mr. Vice-President, frankly speaking, the private sector has dubbed this administration “ah bad-pay Government”. [*Desk thumping*] Mr. Vice-President, I personally know contractors and service providers who are owed \$20 million, \$30 million in outstanding payments. How can the industry survive? Or do we continue to rack up bills and then turn to the Chinese construction firms and outsource labour to meet this housing demand that is going to arise?

Mr. Vice-President, I understand that the investments into the bond scheme

on paper speaks to financing construction projects but the hon. Minister of Finance himself said that all collected money goes to central government and not the Housing Development Corporation. What is the guarantee that adequate releases will be given to the HDC to meet its mandate considering that it has been widely publicized that the HDC needs roughly \$1.8 billion per year to fulfil its mandate? What happens when persons buy bonds with the hope of paying a down payment towards a new home and the purchase price is changed on them like the good people of Gomez Trace in Moruga? We are treading a fine line here. The Housing Development Corporation Act speaks to providing subsidized housing. There is no mention of a profitability element to this. I have my reservations that these bonds could potentially create fierce competition and cause the HDC to compromise its mandate in an attempt to generate more revenue, if it gets to that point.

Mr. Vice-President, I noticed the issue of transferability. I note the Government's intention to add regulations going forward to section 8 and I have some reservations with regard to transferability. I know that the regulations, from time to time, come afterwards but given the fact that the Bill speaks to an increase of \$1 billion, I would like to say on the record that I would have slept better at night knowing the extent of this section 3(1). Transferability to the legal personal representatives upon death is absolutely fine but other methods of transfers make me uneasy. Perhaps, the hon. Minister in her wrap up, can shed some more light on where the Government seeks to go with the regulations and provide some further clarifications. Mr. Vice-President, personally, I would prefer the wording crafted specifically to transfer to the HDC as a payment or a down payment towards to the purchase of a house to avoid any confusion going forward. The more things are written, I believe it to be better. Let us leave any confusion or any ambiguity out of the legislation.

In wrapping up, Mr. Vice-President, I wish to say that any measure introduced to benefit the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago is one that I support wholeheartedly, but again, there are questions to be answered and I do hope that other speakers to come can possibly address some of them and put those matters to rest. I am of the firm view that when we legislate, proper infrastructure, financing and framework must be put into place to avoid putting the cart before the horse. With regard to public trust, confidence and accountability, simply more must be done. [*Desk thumping*] The people of Trinidad and Tobago demand it and we on this side will insist upon it.

Mr. Vice-President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Hon. Members, before I call on the next speaker, permit me to congratulate Sen. Tripathi on his maiden contribution in this Chamber. [*Desk thumping*] Sen. Deyalsingh.

**Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President, for allowing me to speak on the Bill, the Government Savings Bonds (Amdt.) Bill, 2019. When I look at this Bill, I think it is mainly really a provision for tax-free Government bonds to be issued to facilitate the Housing Development Corporation. I think property ownership addresses needs, inequities and social concern so I say there are a lot of advantages to this Bill in the sense that it will encourage individuals to save and have a savings plan—to try and get that culture of saving. So I looked at this Bill and I am saying if bonds are offered and you are looking at the comparison of the interest that persons may get from the bank, if we are looking at this comparison—on my point of view, it is an attractive investment opportunity.

But then again, you know I am saying the cultural aspect to encourage people to save is something we should go at, we should try and encourage in our population, save for a rainy day. As a Member on the other side mentioned that

they saved pennies and cents when he was small, I think Mr. Moses had said that, and at least you can appreciate that it goes a long way in saving and giving persons the opportunity to save.

**5.45 p.m.**

Again, the mindset for families to work together, it will actually cause families to come together, put money together. It will actually help those families with common goals, and in a sense that will help society. So persons can now say: “Listen, let us put our money there. It goes towards a home.” It will definitely have those benefits.

I think it is a very noble gesture on the part of the Government to have this Bill. But you have some concerns, because the concerns also, I must say, would come into place where, you know, I would like to look at the fact that, you know, is there really a need for housing; for it to be in this manner where you have the Government intervention? I would like to look at another point. Are the bonds the only way for this investment should have gone? And the third manner I would like to look at is the fact that, you know, we are asking for a lot of money to be put into the HDC, 1.8 billion. And some Members already mentioned certain concerns they had. So again, if we are putting money into the HDC, we should ensure that those moneys will be well spent.

So, from those three points, I would like to look at the last point first, where I would like to look at the problems that, you know, I saw the problems, the challenges that the HDC had in the past, a lot of challenges. And again, sometimes I look at the HDC as being a political—

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator, let me just caution you at this point that the point that you are making in relation to problems, one, with the housing sector vis-à-vis the HDC has had in the past, that point has been made in the course of this debate

already. What I would ask you to do at this time is if you have anything new to bring it in quickly, because you are moving along a line of tedious repetition in relation to points that have gone before. So you can continue, but I am looking for new points at this time.

**Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh:** Thank you, Sir. I was just trying to elaborate the point that there are difficulties, and I am thinking there has to be some sort of quality control before we put money into this entity again, because there are a lot of deficiencies that were mentioned.

And I am thinking that, to support this legislation giving 1.8 billion, you know, brings up some fears, and that is one of the concerns that I had where we have to ensure that the HDC has some proper measure of control and I am hoping the line Minister would in fact give some sort of guarantee, or some sort of policy directive that the problems we had in the past would not occur again. And we had problems as persons mentioned, in infrastructure, problems in corruption, problems in funding and all of those issues that, if persons are to get any sort of security that I am going to put my money into a fund, an HDC fund, I think certain persons would want to know that entity is now running above board.

While I would not go into specific examples, I just would like to give one example here, Mr. Vice-President.

**Mr. Vice-President:** That is the point that I am making. So as much as I have given guidance in relation to reiterating that point, that there are issues with the HDC and what not, I was listening to see if you would just brush over it and then continue on to that new point. There is absolutely no need to bring in any examples whatsoever, because then you would be in breach of the Standing Order in relation to tedious repetition. So what I am going to ask you to do is to not even mention that point again, not by way of example, and just move on to your next

point. If you have other points, make sure it is new points.

**Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I would like to give the point that if I am going to put money into this bond, will it give me an advantage to move up the line, to jump the line to actually get a house? And you see, if we are thinking that by paying that money, it comes like if I am going to be paying a corrupt official in the HDC money to get a jump in the line, to get some advantage. And in the past you had persons saying that they paid \$10,000 for preferential treatment for HDC houses. So it comes like—to me it parallels.

Look a similar situation, you pay a corrupt officer to get a jump in the line, and here you are now paying a bond and would you get that same jump in the line? I think we have to be very, very careful of having that sort of impression that people may get. Because you see, there are clear guidelines how you can get a house and I think those guidelines have to be, you know, kept there, looked at, because it does not augur well for society to say I am in a line, I am on a list and because somebody has the money and joins and pays a bond, that they can now jump that line. So, I am thinking we need some clarification on the process involved of the persons who actually own those bonds.

I would like to also mention the fact that when I am looking at the fact that the Government needs to get this money, it is really revenue earnings. It is a way for Government to get that money. And I am saying we had other bonds before. It is not to say we did not have bonds. There were bonds existing. We had the National Savings Bonds, the National Investment Fund, the NIF, which, I think when that came on board, it was oversubscribed. We had Government Savings Bond, National Tax Free Savings Bonds, Tax Free Housing Bonds. So those bonds existed. So I am wondering is there?—I mean, you have other bonds there, and could we not have created, you know, other avenues for that bond or do we



really need to create this new bond that we are now debating today?

I am thinking, okay the Government needs the revenue. They may get that money, but you know that goes into the Consolidated Fund and there will be no guarantee that the money that goes into the Consolidated Fund will now go to the housing sector. And this is something we have to know. How are we going to ensure that it goes into the housing sector?

So, while I look at what the Government is attempting to do, and I am thinking it is really not a novel idea in the sense that other areas, the UK, United States, Australia, they all had this idea of, you know, having problems in raising revenue for their housing developments.

And I would like to quote *Butterworths Journal of International Banking and Finance Law*, January 2019, and the article is:

“Socially useful finance: an overview of the social housing bond issues”

And in that article, they actually said:

“A major development in the capital market since the 2008 financial crisis has been the dramatic growth in bond issues by UK Housing Associations (HAs) to fund the provision of social housing. More than £7.3 bn, for example, was raised via the debt capital markets between July 2017 and July 2018, of which approximately three-quarters took the form of public...bond issues,...”

And in this article they actually mentioned the Government was getting some difficulty in raising that money in the private sector. So they were getting some problems. The banks were, you know, not willing to lend that money again. And it:

“...is against the political backdrop of acute UK housing shortage and the government’s aim”—to build—“300,000 new homes to be built each

year...”

They had pressures on the housing authorities there to get that money to fund these houses. So it is similar. So it is a similar situation we see in the UK. We see a similar situation here. We see a similar situation where there is the need for houses, and again need here.

So, what I am looking at, we are now mirroring what the UK has done. But he took it a step further where we are now tying it, actually tying it, in to the national housing scheme. So they did not tie it in. They just got the fund and they put it into the development. We are actually having that bond issue and giving people a sort of a guarantee that they may be in line for getting a house if they qualify. I need to know how they are going to qualify; if they are going to join the line.

Again, in the article they defined:

“‘Social housing’ refers to the provision of low-cost housing for people with low incomes, disabilities or social problems.”

And there is a need in Trinidad for that. We know there is a need. There are 176,000 persons, I think, waiting for homes and that number is growing because you have more persons are unemployed. We have young doctors waiting for jobs. They have to join the list with that, because I am thinking, you know, it is difficult for them to get jobs. And I am thinking that need for homes will increase. We will always have to play catch up. We will always have to catch up. Providing homes, you will always have to say, well, you need to give homes, but you will always have that. Governments worldwide, US, Australia, all those places looked at that bond issue.

So, the level of money that has to be raised, I have some concern in the sense that, would we not be, you know, raising our debt? And this is what I am

concerned of. And I think certain Members did bring it up already. This is something. How are we going to pay back that money? Because our future generations, my children, may have that problem, where we will have that, you know, payment when it is due. So we are looking at a situation where, yes, Government is borrowing money, is getting the bonds, but when it is time for payout we may have that issue of where are they going to get the money? But I am being optimistic. I am thinking well, let us hope something works out. We do not have the oil, the gas that we had before. So my fear really, because the debt accumulation, I think it is now—I think the highest level I think it is \$100 billion now. I think we have a Central Bank overdraft of \$12 billion. So that is a level of concern I have. And I must, you know, express that fear that I have.

Is there really a need for housing? There is definitely a need for housing. Because you see the pride of homeownership, let us say, Mr. Vice-President, I have—

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator, so, I am giving you as much leeway as I possibly can. Several Senators have spoken before, and two things have started to come up, one, repetition of the same arguments, and relevance. We have a Bill with five clauses before us that states and sets out specific things. What you are doing now is veering off into a more general argument in relation to housing. What I am going to ask you to do is to get back to the Bill that is before us and not repeat any of the arguments that have gone before. If you have anything new, and I stress, new, as in we have not heard it before, then I will invite you to bring it forward now.

**Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. Looking at the Bill actually, Mr. Vice-President, I have no major issues with clause 1, which actually gives a standard short title of the Bill. Clause 2 provides the interpretation of the

word “Act”, which was elaborated by Sen. Rambharat on the other side. Clause 3 of the Bill actually seeks to insert a new section 2B which will provide a tax free HDC corporation bonds, under the Act to be applied solely for the purposes of purchasing HDC houses which, again, we would look at not any misuse of the funds there. Clause 4 raises the figure to \$3 billion, which I think there is not a problem with that issue. And all in all, Mr. Vice-President, I would support this Bill in the sense that I see the need for it. I see the need for houses, homes.

I would just like to quote one thing before I close. There is an Environmental Psychologist, Susan Clayton, who said that there is definitely an importance for us to provide homes for persons because that gives them an extension of themselves. A home is an extension of your identity, yourself. And you have a home, you provide that home in a community, persons in that community will now take pride in their community and in the country. New homeowners will definitely energize any new communities they go at. So any sort of measures that we can put in place to give persons homes, to give the underprivileged homes, I will support it.

One other point I would like to elaborate on, Sen. Teemal mentioned the fact that the elderly should be taken into account, and I had come prepared to speak more on the fact that certain developments should really be aided solely for the elderly, where you have—because you know we have an ageing population and we have to accommodate special areas, special spaces that the older individual can fit in, can be comfortable, you have the ramps, you have everything there available. So, this is something I am hoping we could look at. Again, moving on a little extra to what Sen. Teemal said, disabled persons, I am thinking should also be taken care of. In closing, I thank you for allowing me to contribute. Thank you.

**Sen. Dr. Lester Henry:** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I join in this debate

briefly. As Sen. Obika graciously pronounced, I am a macroeconomist, and he said it with great admiration and a big smile. So I would just like to add a little context to the importance of this Bill and what it is the Government is trying to do.

[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]

A couple of my colleagues already touched on the key issues, but I would just like to add a little bit that might be useful in understanding what we are dealing with.

First to begin, Madam President, many of my colleagues are in the newspapers, fairly frequently and on TV programmes, and so on, telling the Government not to borrow for unproductive investment; that you should not borrow any money unless it is going towards productive investment. I am sure many of my colleagues on the other side are quite familiar with this statement. Now, this is a prime example of borrowing for productive investment, and many still have a problem with it. I mean, you cannot get anything more productive than borrowing money to increase your housing stock. Because we economists consider the housing stock a critical part of national investment. Right? You have business investment and you have residential housing development. In the context of Government borrowing this is almost as good as it can get. Right? So there should not be any real issue about the purpose of this Bill and the usefulness and the appropriateness of what the Government is doing with this Bill.

Second, I also want to just touch on the fact that many people have spoken about the problems of the HDC and the housing situation. And I am just going by what others speakers said, and without really mentioning the fact that Trinidad and Tobago, as far as housing stock is concerned, is one of the success stories of the world. We have one of the highest rates of homeownership anywhere in the world. In fact, if you go to the statistics we are ranked somewhere at No. 25 in the world,

at about 76 per cent homeownership rates. Right? The No. 1 country in the world across several surveys is Romania, where there is a 96 per cent ownership, right, homeownership rate. We come in on the same survey at No. 25, at 76 per cent.

Just interestingly, just by comparison, the United States comes in at 64 per cent and is No. 42. Britain, the United Kingdom, where many of us admire, comes in at 63.5 per cent at No. 43. So the US and the United Kingdom are behind us significantly by a full 10 percentage point. So what I am saying is that we all—I know the stories of gloom and doom tend to make better press, but we must not miss the elephant in the room in terms of our housing development. It has been one of the major success stories of the country beginning in the 60s, of course, largely driven by the PNM and solid policies toward the construction of housing developments.

That whole ethos of where people expect to own a home is something that was planted, that seed was planted by the PNM in the early days. So when you have a list of 176,000 people on an HDC list, it does not give a fair reflection of the successes that we have had, in terms of building houses. Right?

Many parts of the world that are much more developed, where the income is much higher per capita, do not have the kind of housing stock that we have. In fact, you go through the Caribbean, you go through many parts of Latin America, we can be the envy of many of those countries because of the successes.

Now, there are—I just want to stick a pin for my former colleague who used to sit right opposite there on the Independent Bench, Dr. Dhanayshar Mahabir, because he was one who was pushing for this kind of thing. Every time he spoke on budget debates and finance Bills he would always insist that the Government should bring back savings bonds and housing bonds and as such. So I am sure if he was here today he would be quite pleased with what the Government is offering

us. Right? Dr. Mahabir, I do not know where he is now, but he was my friend and colleague for many years in the Department of Economics. So, I am sure that he would have fully thrown his support behind this, because it is something he was calling for a long time. And, of course, the whole problem of lack of investment opportunities that was mentioned, I just want to emphasize that this is a real issue for the country, right.

Even what Sen. Deyalsingh said about the oversubscription of the NIF and so on. Every time you put something out there it is oversubscribed and you must understand the reason for this. This is because there is excess liquidity in our banking system on a perennial basis. People really do not know what to invest in. There is nothing out there, so they look for any kind of opportunity, especially if it is something might be bringing a rate on these bonds, expected rate of interest at 4 or 4½ per cent. Madam Minister? Yes—which is pretty decent. And in the context of our relatively low rate of inflation, that is not a bad deal. And, of course, when you put your money into chequing and normal savings account and stuff now, you are getting almost nothing. So it is an attractive offer. So there would be no surprise if this is oversubscribed again, because of the problem of persistent excess liquidity in our system; an area I spent a lot of time researching, trying to find exactly how to deal with this excess liquidity problem.

One of the problems, when you have a lack of things to invest in, that is why the Government has to do these bonds and such things, it is that you encourage a lot of capital flight, because people get no returns on what—they are not getting any returns on anything they put their money in here, any returns of any serious nature.

So it would plug, not by a big margin, but some small—it would make some dent in that issue of people thinking that they have to take their money out to get a

relatively decent rate of return. So they might be inclined to put their money back here.

Now, remember this is just part of the initiative to develop the housing sector. The Government already had announced private/public partnership as one other aspect of the housing thrust.

And, secondly that brings me to the point of the real issue we face why the Government has to do these things is that the private sector in this country has been either unwilling or unable to build affordable housing, and that is a fact of life that we have to deal with. Were it not for the Government, the major housing development of this country would not happen. Because regardless of the conditions, even in the period of boom where money was flowing, and so on, the private sector still could not step in and fill the void. They do, of course, to some extent you had HCL under the Clico umbrella, building fairly decent housing developments in certain parts. But that, of course, is clearly not enough. So without the Government getting involved and trying to push for development of the greater housing stock, that list of 176,000 might have been 200,000 or 300,000, nearly half the population. And we all know that that list is very suspicious because of the huge number; how high it is. It just does not make any sense. Right?

So what I am saying is that the Bill before us is appropriate. I just wanted to put some context on it and to let people know that we have nothing to be ashamed of in terms of our investment in housing in this country. As many of us know, it could always be better. Like everything else, we could have done better. But the record of housing development in this country is nothing to be ashamed of. We have been very good and that is reflected in the high rate of homeownership and just the capital we put out into our housing stock. With these few words, Madam



President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. Saddam Hosein:** Thank you very much, Madam President, for giving me the opportunity to join this debate on a Bill to amend the Government Savings Bond Act, Chap. 71:41.

Madam President, I am pleased to join this debate because this debate offers all of us in this honourable Chamber an opportunity to give those in society who require homes and a shelter the opportunity to do so. Madam President, we will support any measure of the Government with respect to taking care of the poor and vulnerable in society. [*Desk thumping*]

Under the Housing Development Corporation Act, the HDC has a statutory mandate to provide subsidized housing for those persons who are of low and middle income. But Madam President, we must marry and we must measure the policy of the Government with respect to what the reality is on the ground. And I will go deeper into my debate by making a complete analysis of whether or not the legislative aims and objectives of this particular piece of legislation can in fact reach realistically and feasibly its stated goals, having regard to our prevailing circumstances.

Madam President, what is being offered to the country is a Government Tax Free Saving Bonds. It is very attractive to those who can afford it. This is nothing new, Madam President, as several countries have issued housing bonds. There are some countries, especially those in the Asian continent that would have used the housing bonds and backed it by the municipal corporation taxes in which they collect. This Government has taken the decision that this would be a Government guaranteed bond. And several speakers would have indicated, from the Government side, that this bond was in fact a Government guarantee, which means that we would be lifting the debt ceiling of Trinidad and Tobago.

Recently, it was raised from \$300 million to \$2 billion in a finance Act in this Parliament, and then now we are asked to raise the debt ceiling even higher to \$3 billion, increasing by \$1 billion, injecting it into the housing sector of Trinidad and Tobago. But, Madam President, it leaves the country in an unknown state as to what interest a person will be entitled to under these bonds.

Because when Sen. Henry spoke, he had to ask the Minister in the Ministry of Finance whether or not it is 4½ per cent. We do not know the duration of these bonds, whether it is going to be five, 10, 15 or 20 years.

**6.15 p.m.**

This is distinct from what we had recently in the NIF and the Government comes with this false narrative that these bonds will be oversubscribed. But we must remember, Madam President, because we have to use comparators when we pass legislation in this Parliament. Because they said that the NIF was in fact oversubscribed but when you ask the Minister, “Well, who subscribed for these bonds?”—do you know that the National Insurance Board took \$1 billion in bonds? It is the Government borrowing from the Government and then saying, “you know what, we oversubscribed”. [*Desk thumping*] So, “I lend meh self ah dollar and we oversubscribe”. They are selling the false narrative to themselves.

And, Madam President, one has to ask whether or not when these bonds are issued, whether or not this will be a real oversubscription or whether or not it would be a narrative for the PNM to go into an election with. Because you cannot be using the Parliament and state resources for political mileage, because this is a very important and significant issue where homeownership is concerned with respect to vulnerable persons in society, Madam President.

**Sen. Haynes:** Let them know.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** And, Madam President, this Government is in its last and final

year, last and final year, last and final year. [*Desk thumping*] They had from 2015 to 2019 to build homes for the 75,000 people that they now complain about who applied for homes. Madam President, what have they built? I expected that the Minister—

**Madam President:** Sen. Hosein, I am so sorry to interrupt you but I am hearing, again, I say different words, but the same thing. And I have heard it already. Sen. Haynes is smiling at me because I think she knows where I am coming from. So I am going to ask you in your contribution, please do not rehash what has been said because we have been here for some time now.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Madam President, for your guidance. And I was asking why it is that this is going to be such a significant—

**Madam President:** So you are rehashing?

**Sen. S. Hosein:** No, Madam President.

**Madam President:** Have a seat. Therefore, I just want you to take stock of what you intend to present, filter a little bit and take off everything that has been said before and presented.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Madam President, the Minister of Housing and Rural Development should have been present today in this Chamber in order to indicate to us whether or not what the real figures are. Because when you inject \$1 billion into the housing sector, we as a Parliament must know exactly how many houses are going to be built, the timeline in which these houses are going to be built. And, Madam President, one of the most important issues, I think, facing this country, is the location of these apartments. Because we see a culture by this Government that they are focusing on housing in certain areas of Trinidad and Tobago. Because you are seeing houses being built and units—

**Madam President:** Sen. Hosein, Sen. Hosein, please, please look at the Bill that

is before us, all right? What you are presenting now is for another debate, it is not for what is before us, okay?

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much. And, Madam President, if I buy a bond from the Government, I expect to know where I am going to be getting this house. Because I am not going to be purchasing a bond and making a lifetime investment and I am unsure of this investment, because I do not want to be placed in a housing unit where I end up like the residents of Greenvale, and the residents of Moruga as my colleague, Sen. Tripathi would have raised.

And, Madam President, how would I know if my house is going to be in St. Joseph, or in San Fernando West, or in those marginal seats, because it seems as though the culture of this Government is to build houses in six specific constituencies of this country. And I think that is an important issue I need to raise here, because you are asking the general public in order to invest in these bonds—

**Madam President:** Sen. Hosein, you can raise it here in the Parliament, but not in this Bill. Okay, please. I am going to ask you one more time to focus on what is before us.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Sure. Madam President, I will move on. Because Sen. Lester Henry raised a very important point. He raised a point that we have not done enough with respect to private/public partnerships. Madam President, had the Government really gone into this focus with respect to private partnership, you would have realized that working together with the private contractors and private investors, that it would be able to assist the Government in terms of constructing homes.

Madam President, this was attempted. And the 17<sup>th</sup> of May, 2019, was a very important day in this country because we learnt that on that day a contract was signed with the Housing Development Corporation and one company called China

Gezhouba Group International Engineering Company Limited, I have the contract in my hand. And, Madam President, what this contract did was offer half a billion dollars to construct 5,000 housing units in Trinidad and Tobago.

**Madam President:** Sen. Hosein, Sen. Haynes in her contribution made reference to a question that she had posed and an answer received on this very issue. Okay? And I am trying to just point out to you that what you are now saying, you are repeating some of what Sen. Haynes presented but you are also veering very far away from the Bill. Okay.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** I am guided, Madam President. But, Madam President, if you would allow me, I would like to raise a fresh point on this issue, because I read the contract. And when I read this contract—and I am making the point with respect to public/private partnership because no one in the Chamber dealt with that point in this debate. And the point is, the concessions that were offered to this Chinese company, Madam President, no VAT, no duties, no custom import duties. They got a sweetheart deal and in this case, why it is that we are not—

**Madam President:** Sen. Hosein, please, please. I am not, I really do not want to curtail your contribution, but this is about—I do not know how many times I have to stand up and tell you to come back to the matter at hand. And please when you get up, do not let your first word be “but”. Please begin with a new point.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Madam President, the thing is that I am raising a point with respect to the public/private partnership. I am raising a point with respect to how foreign contractors are being treated by this Government. Why is it that the local contractors cannot be afforded the same opportunity? [*Desk thumping*] Why it is concessions cannot be given to these persons, so that we can rejuvenate our economy so that the money stays right here, Madam President, so that when persons invest in bonds that they know that they are investing locally. [*Desk*

*thumping]*

Madam President, we have contractors in this country who have to sell away their equipment because the Government owes them money, but yet we are selling away our patrimony to these foreign companies. And that when “de mark buss” they have to terminate the contract. How can persons have confidence in the HDC if the HDC is being mismanaged in this manner? [*Desk thumping*] How can persons entrust their moneys in this Government and the HDC, when you see things like this happening, because you lose confidence in investment? Anyone will tell you that you will invest where there is confidence, Madam President. And where there is the absence of this you would realize that we are in big trouble. Because when the Government collects this \$1 billion over the next one-year period, remember five to 10 years down the road that we have to find the money to pay back these bondowners together with interest and also provide a house to them. That is what you have to do.

Madam President, it hurts me to know that we are at this stage, that we are at this juncture that where billions of dollars have been spent and thousands of housing units have been constructed. Madam President, would you know that if the Government is really serious about providing housing for persons there are thousands, if not tens—I do not want to say so much, but thousands of units, in HDC developments that are already constructed but not properly outfitted. There are empty units.

We recently leant right in Chaguanas in Oasis, that there are persons going into those empty houses, bandits, and stealing whatever is inside those houses. Madam President, we have—

**Madam President:** Sen. Hosein, you are not taking my guidance, you are not taking my guidance. And therefore, I am going to have to ask you, this is my very

last warning, and I have to ask you to get to the Bill and get to it very quickly, Sen. Hosein.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Madam President. And what we have to indicate and what this Government needs to manage is something called “legitimate expectation”. Because the Government has to manage its communication. Because as I said earlier on, you cannot be using these housing bonds for an election purpose. And the reason I say this, Madam President, is because the narrative is and it is being reported widely in the papers and I am very disheartened that the Government has not rebutted these points—*[Interruption]* Would you like to contribute? And, Madam President, what I am asking is that the Government controls its communication when it comes to these bonds because you create a legitimate expectation in the minds of these bondholders that as soon as I have a bond and I go to the HDC, I am entitled to a home.

It is completely impossible for that to happen, we would have to invest tens of billions of dollars into the HDC for that to occur because as the Government said we have 75,000 pending applications, Madam President. And that is a very important point that the Government needs to do in terms of managing their communication. Because while the bonds could be a good thing, Madam President, you have to show that you have to issue these bonds in such a responsible manner while managing the expectations of those bondholders.

And, Madam President, I know you do not want me to rehash some of the points but, Madam President—

**Madam President:** Do not put it like that.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Sorry, I do not want to be intrusive into the Standing Orders, Madam President, and be breaching any of the Standing Orders. But my friend, Senator Clarence—

**Hon. Senator:** Minister.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Sen. Clarence Rambharat, he would have said that it was a simple debate, four clauses, five clauses, he read the five clauses, he read a newspaper article, all well and fine. But, Madam President, what he did not explain to the country is that this Bill, when it is passed, is one of the most expensive Bills to ever be passed in this Parliament, worth \$1 billion. [*Desk thumping*] So we should have the opportunity here to stand up and question and hold this Government to account. Because as long as I stand here in this Parliament I will continue to hold this Government to account, Madam President, for their actions.

And let me just look at this bond, let me look at the Regulations, because this bond, according to the existing Regulations, it could be issued up until \$25,000 per bondholder. Let us multiply that by the 4½ per cent interest rate. So every year someone will be entitled to \$1,125 in interest if my math is correct. So at the end of five years you are entitled to \$5,625 in interest and your \$25,000 bond. Madam President would know that that \$5,000 cannot even pay one instalment to the HDC for your house? That cannot pay it, and then you ask persons to invest in these things and they are not guaranteed to get a home.

Also, you would see that the Government is asking persons to invest and to save to get these homes, these HDC homes. While at the same time that they are constructing a home for the Prime Minister at the tune of \$18 million in Tobago. But what the Minister of Public Utilities said is that we must do more with less and I agree, because this country, Trinidad and Tobago, could do much more with less of the PNM, Madam President, that is what we could do.

And I would like to conclude my contribution in this debate, Madam President, because the Government has hustled the people of \$4 billion and now



that they come back in this current Parliament to hustle them for one more billion dollars. This is a Government of hustlers, Madam President, hustlers. I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West):** [*Desk thumping*] Thank you, Madam President. My friends on the other side have a penchant for turning something that is simple and straightforward and for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, into something that is sinister. They do it frequently and without fail. So, while I thank my colleagues for taking us a long way in clearing up the issues, Sen. Rambharat, Sen. Henry, Sen. Le Hunte, went a long way in simplifying and clarifying the Bill, there are certain issues that were raised that I would like to address before I do a windup, I plan to be very short, Madam President.

So one of the issues that was raised was that this measure would create a charge on the Consolidated Fund. If we accept that the Government needs to provide housing for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago who cannot afford to go on the open market and buy their housing, there will be a charge to the Consolidated Fund. How else do we provide subsidized housing for members of the public who cannot afford housing on their own at market prices unless we put a charge on the Consolidated Fund? So, either we directly take money out of the Consolidated Fund and give it to HDC and tell them “go and build the houses with that”—in which case we have to finance the other things that Government has to spend money on like salaries and pensions and so on—or we have to borrow money to do it. But it will always be a charge on the Consolidated Fund. So saying that this measure puts any more onerous burden on the Consolidated Fund is misguided.

There is a need for questions to be answered as opposed to what is the limit

and those things. But what we have said to you is that these are the basic provisions to allow us to introduce the HDC housing fund and we will come later with regulations that will spell out who can buy, how you can cash, whether you can encash, how you can transfer, if you can transfer, those things will come in the regulations. So using regulations in respect of other bonds to superimpose them on what we are doing here today is incorrect. When the regulations are drafted and brought before the House, you will see and have an opportunity to debate the proposal as to how we propose to flesh out this thing.

The issue of public/private partnerships, you will remember that the Government came to the House and said we are going public/private partnerships. We do not have the kind of financing that we had prior to 2015 and therefore, we are trying to find innovative ways to finance the construction of houses so we can continue with the programme of housing people who cannot afford to house themselves. We went out to the market to get public/private partnerships and as Sen. Henry would have indicated, the appetite is not there for the public/private partnerships. Sen. Teemal suggested that we try more innovative ways to get them interested, we have tried all sorts of ways. We have said, "We will give you land so that you can build, get your financing and we will give you the land". We have said, "If you successfully complete any unit within the cost-frame and the design structure promoted by the HDC, we will give you \$100,000 per unit".

So we have tried lots of ways, but there is not the appetite to do it. So either we wait until the private sector develops the appetite and we do not know when that will happen, or the Government has to continue to foot the bill. And this is— one of the ways we are footing the bill is to finance the HDC so that they could continue to construct.

So let me give you the figures. At the moment under construction we have

3,666 units, of that under the public/private partnership arrangement you have 277, and of that under the Housing Incentive Programme which is where we say you build the house and we will give you cash over and above the cost of the house, we only have 72 units. So if we wait on those two arrangements to give us our housing stock, we will make absolutely no progress. The only way we can try to make a dent is directly through the HDC unless and until the private sector changes their approach to public/private partnership. I do not know if it is a global phenomenon or if it is just a Trinidad and Tobago phenomenon, but the private sector in Trinidad and Tobago prefers to provide services to the Government rather than invest their capital and provide a finished product. So we are stuck with the structure that we have. And to operate the structure that we have, we have to finance it, and once we are financing it, there is a charge on the Consolidated Fund.

Sen. Tripathi, I hope I am pronouncing your name properly, and I would like to add, to join the Vice-President in congratulating you on your maiden speech, very well done, I think Sen. Sobers needs to be concerned about his position. *[Laughter]* But what I would say in respect of your contribution, was that there is no structural issues with the Moruga property. The Moruga property is properly built, there is no sewer problem. There is an issue with respect to the pricing, the HDC is looking into that and will address that when they have sorted out what the issue is.

A few people raised the issue of there being no guarantee that the money that is raised under this facility will get to the HDC and therefore no guarantee that it will be used towards housing. But in effect what is happening, because the Government is trying to move ahead quickly with its housing projects, they have actually—the Government has actually advanced money to the HDC and the housing project is ongoing with those advance funds. As any money comes in

under this, that money will be offset against the advance towards the housing. So the money is directed to HDC, is going to HDC, and the sole purpose of it from the HDC perspective is to allow them to get the continuous flow of funds to continue building their houses.

But the key focus of this piece of legislation is really to give the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, who are interested in securing low-cost housing, a means to save in an effective manner to make a down payment on their houses. There really is a genuine issue with people being at the brink of being offered a house and having no money set aside. And there are few speakers who said today, especially on the Opposition Bench, that “people cannot afford, poor people cannot afford to contribute towards this bond”. But if you cannot afford to put aside \$5,000 periodically, how can you afford to put aside \$35,000 to make a down payment? So as and when you have some money, you set it aside and that is your housing bond.

If you put the money in the housing bond, chances are you are less likely to want to find a means to spend it. So Carnival comes up next year, you think you want to buy a costume, you are less likely to say “let me look at my housing bond money”, than you would be, going in the bank and taking out the money that you have been setting aside. So this makes it more likely that by the time the Housing Development Corporation calls you and says, “I have a house for you”, it is more likely that you will actually have the down payment to put towards that house. And if you develop the discipline of saving periodically over the period, you may actually have more of the down payment than the minimum, reduce the size of your mortgage and make that more affordable, it puts us in a better position.

Trinidad and Tobago has notoriously been known for not having a savings culture. We tend to save when the Government gives us incentive to do that.

There were a lot of people who used to save in the credit unions when you got a tax credit for your credit union savings. When that was stopped the savings got reduced. So that what we are doing is trying to give people an incentive to save so that they can realize the dream that they have to own housing. So that when we come to you and say, "We are ready to give you a key", you will say, "Here is my money, here are the bonds that you can put towards my housing". This is really the focus of this particular measure. I do not see how we can genuinely have a problem with that objective.

So I highly recommend that we divorce the politics from what we have before us. I recommend that we divorce the issue of how many houses are being built, and where they are being built, and whatever, and look at the fact that what we are doing is trying to provide the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago with a means to save towards a down payment to the house. We are doing that in a way that gives them a return, that gives them a better opportunity to save, because rather than the 1 per cent or ½ per cent that they will get in the bank, they are getting 4½ per cent from the Government, it is tax-free. It is more securely set aside than their bank funds will be. So they are more likely to get there quicker, and once they get there quicker they have a better opportunity to own the house.

In bringing the regulations we will identify things like what kind of priority they will get in respect of what percentage of the housing stock. Those kinds of issues will be addressed in the regulations as we flesh them out. But the measure that we are bringing is a simple measure. It gives citizens of Trinidad and Tobago the opportunity to invest in housing bonds for the purpose of acquiring a house. I recommend the Bill to you, it is a sound Bill. I ask you to support it and I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

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

*Senate in committee.*

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

*Clause 4.*

*Question proposed:* That clause 4 stand part of the Bill.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Madam Chair. One issue I want to raise with respect to clause 4(a), is the transferability of the bonds. It is a point of clarification, is it that once a bond is issued to an individual, they are free within the life of that bond to transfer it to any person who they please or is it that they would need to seek permission from the HDC to transfer the bond?

**Sen. West:** Through you, Madam Chair. The Minister of Finance will have the option to determine when and in what circumstances the bond will be transferable. So certainly the bond will have to be transferable to the HDC to allow people to use that as down payment for their houses. So that is one clear example of when it will have to be transferable.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Well, the context I am really referring to, Madam Chair, through you to the Minister, is that, if I transfer from one individual to another, not to the HDC, is it that what is contemplated with the inclusion of the word transferability?

**Sen. West:** That is why I began my answer by saying that the Minister of Finance will determine the circumstances in which the bond will be transferable. So, for example, rather than saying it could be transferable to anybody at any time, the provision may be that a parent may be allowed to transfer it to a child, for example. But those things will be fleshed out as the regulations are developed.

**6.45 p.m.**

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Because the regulations as they stand right now in the parent Act,

that would not be applicable to this.

**Sen. West:** That is correct, because each of the three regulations apply to the three currently existing types of bonds.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** So only when we get the regulations then we would know whether or not these are subject to the approval of the Minister.

**Sen. West:** That is correct. And you will have the opportunity at that time to give an input into your concurrence or otherwise of what is proposed.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you.

**Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy:** Madam Chairman, Minister, the issue about Tobago and having access to the facility that is available through the HDC, where will that come in?

**Sen. West:** The Minister of Finance is meeting with the Tobago House of Assembly on Friday, and those matters will be discussed. So one of the things that is being contemplated is that the bonds that are purchased by Tobagonians may be transferable to the Tobago House of Assembly in respect of provision of housing in Tobago, but that will be discussed and fleshed out during his meeting with the THA on Friday.

**Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy:** Thank you.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Thank you very much. Minister, that answer you just gave there, now, when you look at 2B, that was clause 3 that we just passed, the bonds are specific to the HDC. Is it that you are contemplating that the THA will now—so we are saying that the HDC will be the bond issuers or is it the Ministry of Finance?

**Sen. West:** The Ministry of Finance is issuing all the bonds under this provision. What the legislation currently contemplates is that the HDC will be the institution through which the funds raised under the bonds will be expended.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** But it is specific to purchase of houses from the HDC?

**Sen. West:** Yes. That is correct. So if and when the Minister of Finance has his discussion with the THA, and a determination is made that the THA needs to be factored in, that will be taken into account. At the moment, the intention is HDC housing, HDC bonds. So it could be, for example, that the financing is left with the HDC—responsibility is left with the HDC and facilitates and waits for the THA for the construction of houses under the portfolio of the HDC. That has to be determined.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** I think because that is the only way the bond will now be applicable, once it is from HDC.

**Sen. West:** As currently drafted, that is correct.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Also, is it contemplated that there are any criteria for a person to be issued a bond or is it that it is free for any person to purchase a bond?

**Sen. West:** The criteria that exist at the moment, a criterion with respect to who qualifies for HDC housing, and because the bonds are for HDC housing, the people, you will get a link between the qualification for HDC housing and who will be interested in buying the bond.

**Sen. S. Hosein:** Okay. Thank you.

**Madam Chairman:** Sen. Vieira.

**Sen. Vieira:** Thank you, Chair. I was just wondering about the role of the SEC, because once you have issued bonds you come under their jurisdiction. How does that interact and dovetail with the Minister and the HDC?

**Sen. West:** Well, the only entity issuing bonds will be the Minister of Finance. There is no secondary market contemplated, so that I do not see any HDC registration or approval issue arising.

**Sen. Vieira:** And the supervisory authority of the SEC?



**Sen. West:** For the issue of bonds by the Minister of Finance, no.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Question put and agreed to:* That the Bill be reported to the Senate.

*Senate resumed.*

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

## **ADJOURNMENT**

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan):** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn sine die. We have come to the end of the Fourth Session. [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Hon. Senators, before I put the question on the adjournment, leave has been granted for two matters to be raised. Sen. Richards. [*Desk thumping*]

### **Opioids in Schools (Strategies to Counteract)**

**Sen. Paul Richards:** Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me to raise this matter on the adjournment of the Senate, which focuses on the need for the Government to advise as to the strategies and interventions being pursued to counteract the sale and use of the opioids, so-called “zesser” pills, another psychoactive drug in our nation’s schools. Just to give some context, Madam President, because this is of great concern to me because it involves school age children.

I would like to quote a couple articles. Wednesday, September 11, 2019 an article by Ryan Hamilton-Davis in, I believe, the *Newsday*:

“Police: ‘Zesser pills’ in Schools.

Police are warning teachers and parents to be on the alert as a potentially lethal drug said to be a combination of cocaine and ecstasy is being circulated and sold in the nation’s schools.

TTPS public information officer Wayne Mystar made this known yesterday at the police’s weekly press briefing at Police Administration Building in Port of Spain. He said police are ‘critically concerned’—as these so-called—“party drug has found its way into the hands of school children.

‘Based on our intelligence, it is a combination of ecstasy and cocaine, and they are designed like sweets. We are realising because of the infiltration of gangs in schools, we are seeing the drug is finding itself in schools’...The drug also seems to be very popular at parties...

Other police sources told Newsday while there is no doubt the party drug is in some schools, its sale is more prevalent at parties and social events”—sometimes frequented by some school children.

The drug is also, according to:

“Police intelligence revealed one manner in which users are making the drug is by crushing ecstasy pills and mixing it with cocaine.

Users then mix the concoction with alcoholic drinks...non-alcoholic”—beverages, which is even more dangerous where children are concerned also.

“During a panel discussion...Minister of Health Terrence Deyalsingh warned...TT citizens, particularly in their 20’s and 30’s to beware of the drug, and said personal responsibility is key in protecting themselves from”—this drug.

Also, quoting Ria Taitt in the *Express*, September 13, 2019, Fitzgerald Hinds was Acting Attorney General on the day, and Member of Parliament for Laventille West says:

“Illegal drugs disguised as candy are being distributed to children”—so said the—“acting National Security Minister Fitzgerald Hinds...

Responding to an urgent question in the”—other place—“on the circulation of”—so-called—“‘zesser pills’ in the nation’s schools, Hinds said police had seized ‘cookies and brownies’ at teen parties and had sent them for analysis at the Forensic Science Centre in St James.”

Madam President, if we are to look at what happened in the US: 130 people die a day, every day, from opioid-related drug abuse; 42,000 died in 2016 in the US. The number increased to 70,237 in 2017. 68 per cent of that 70,000 were opioid-related overdoses. Between 1999 and 2017, 400,000 people died in the US as a result of opioid-related diseases. So the fact that it has now found itself into schools and in the hands of school children in Trinidad and Tobago should be of grave concern to all of us, hence my motion on the adjournment.

We are calling it “zesser drug” but I did two interviews two weeks ago in my other capacity, and it is also being called gold, molly, speed, heights, sex and hype by school children. The largest demographic of abusers is the 18 to 25 abusers, but it starts as early as age 12 and rolls into 17, and we have to look at it as a public health issue in Trinidad and Tobago, although the Motion is directed to the Minister of Education, because it has found its way into the nation’s schools.

So the question is: What are we doing as a country in terms of our strategy of dealing with this? And we have to look at it, one, in terms of the importation issues, because my understanding is that we do not make cocaine in Trinidad and Tobago or the other components of this malady. The issue of the sale to minors

and the accessibility of this malady to minors, and the abuse and addictions/health issue and the pharmaceutical controls, because my understanding also through you, Madam President, is that people are going to pharmacies and buying combinations of other types of drugs in a bid to get high. So we have a larger general problem of addiction, and we are finding ways to mimic what we are seeing in the US.

This is specifically focused on school children, but we have seen videos on social media of people in states of delirium stumbling out of parties unable to regain consciousness or to have any level of *compos mentis* in those circumstances. And in many cases I understand, it is a rage for particularly secondary school children and tertiary education children in some instances, and I have not been able to confirm this. When the drugs are crushed into powder form, in some instances, in addition to, as I said before, being put into drinks, alcohol and non-alcoholic, I understand it is being sprayed into the air to give users a sense of euphoria at these gatherings, which makes it even more difficult or dangerous I should say, because then people who do not make conscious decisions to partake may be affected.

So my question is to the Ministry of Education and the Government as to what strategies, again, we are doing to counteract one, the sale and access to school children and two, the use and possible addiction issues related to this opioid issue. Thank you, Madam President.

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Madam President, I thank Member Richards for this Motion. It gives us an opportunity to share with the public and with this House some of the things that the Government has been doing in relation to what Sen. Richards describes as the “zesser pills”, but that may be a fancy name for something that is clearly dangerous.

We have had the experiences in the United States, we have had the experience in Canada with opioids, with fentanyl, in particular, and we have seen how medication intended for strict medicinal use, in particular, in use in people who require major surgery and for people who suffer from extremely debilitating diseases, and it has become something that is—and I do not want to use another fancy word “recreation”—recreational use.

Madam President, I would tell you also that I was very surprised to know that ketamine, for example, which is something that is used on large animals suffering severe pain, for example, a horse that has suffered a broken leg and has to undergo surgery, ketamine is used in those animals, and I understand from dealing with our vets in the Ministry, that ketamine has become something that people use to get a high.

So I want to respond first by saying the list of dangerous drugs which the list what is captured by the dangerous drugs legislation, has not been something that has been continuously updated. So it is a fact that Trinidad and Tobago has fallen behind. For example, a lot of people would have been surprised to know that ecstasy was not on the list, and there are reports. We have been working via the Attorney General and the Legislative Review Committee, we have been working on updating the list. And I would tell you, having met with some of experts from forensics, for example, they have given us stories of autopsies being done and the presence of ecstasy being there in persons who have died of unnatural causes, and it is a fact that we have had ecstasy in the country. We have had deaths arising out of it, and the response of the Government via the Attorney General is to update the dangerous drugs legislation and, particularly, to list those things which we recognize should be classified as dangerous drugs and have not been classified.

The consequence of that of course, is that there will be restrictions on the

import. There will be restrictions on the way it is dispensed and the way it is used. But, most importantly, in relation to dangerous drugs, the consequences are going to be severe because our dangerous drugs legislation, even though it was introduced 20 years ago in the 1990s, even then the fines and the penalties were onerous and remain onerous.

In relation to the schools, I would say four things. The first is to say there is a policy in the national school code of conduct. There is a policy which explicitly states that no one shall be permitted to have on their person or under their control an illegal drug traffic either for personal use, trafficking or any other reason. So there is a policy in place. Of course, a policy has to be enforced.

The consequences of breach listed in that policy, there are six possible consequences. One is confiscation of the item; two, meetings between parents and/or guardians and the school administration. Very importantly, intervention by the Student Support Services Division because, of course, if you are dealing with a school aged child having in their possession at all but, in particular, on the school compound, then you are dealing with somebody who is influenced or may have external influence, may have issues within the family, may have issues within the community, and it requires a specialist type of intervention. It is not your regular criminal or drug trafficker. You are dealing with an extremely sensitive issue and a sensitive age group that requires a professional response. There is the option of suspension for up to seven days, referral to the law enforcement agency and, ultimately, expulsion.

The third thing I would say in relation is that the Ministry of Education is mindful and is aware of reports in the public domain, but the Ministry has not received any report officially in relation to the presence of these pills on school compounds, but the Ministry is not blind to what is happening and is not deaf to

what is being said, but there has been no official report of the pills or substances of that nature being on the school compound.

Notwithstanding, the Ministry has been proactive and has taken three measures that I would talk about. The first is that the Ministry has been conducting sessions with parents, with teachers, with students to alert them to the potential, the possibility and the risks of engaging in the use of these substances. The second is that the Ministry has engaged in school-based interventions, bringing in the professionals who are employed by the Ministry and who are employed otherwise, bringing them into the school and having interventions at the school level.

And, of course, the Ministry has to be working with all the law enforcement agencies and all the agencies that provide social support, counselling support, family support. So the Ministry has adopted an interagency approach dealing in particular with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, with the health professionals and the counselling professionals in the Ministry of Health, and with those trained professionals in the Ministry of Education.

So I would close by saying that for all of us who have followed what has happened in Canada, in Toronto, in particular, and in the United States—and Toronto it has been fentanyl and in the US they call it the “opioid crisis”, but really these things sound very glamorous, but when it comes down to a family level—and Dr. Deyalsingh earns his living trying to reverse the effects of it—when this comes down to an individual or a household level, it is destructive and the starting point has to be the updating of the listing to ensure that those things that are dangerous are classified as dangerous and the legal consequences will flow. I thank you.

*[Desk thumping]*

**Chatham Government Primary School**

**UNREVISED**

**(Completion of)**

**Sen. Taharqa Obika:** Thank you, Madam President. I treat this matter as very serious, and I am grateful for the privilege to raise this matter for yet another year, the failure of the Government to adequately address public concerns relating to the prolonged construction of the Chatham Government Primary School. I want to point to three newspaper headlines: 24<sup>th</sup> of May, 2017, *Guardian* newspaper: “Chatham students beg for new school”; the second headline, 25<sup>th</sup> of May, the next day, 2017, LoopTT, “Chatham parents demand new school”; the third headline, August 16, 2018—so the next year, which was last year, before school open—“Chatham parents frustrated over incomplete school”.

Madam President, it will sadden all of us here to know that this year there has been no call from neither the parents nor the children of Point Fortin, who are attending in cramped conditions a school that was meant for early childhood care when it was built under the Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government, and because of the dilapidated condition of the ancient Chatham school, they were temporarily put there, and when this Government came into office, they got a school that was 95 per cent complete. In fact, when you speak to persons in Chatham and you go and pass by the school, they are telling you the ceiling tiles were completed, doors were in place, toilets were left to be installed, there were floor tiles, the landscape of the yard, probably being the only thing left. The electricity was done, installed.

Now, the population of the school is 125 to 150 students, ordinarily, and it serves a wide catchment area. Persons from Buenos Ayres, from Cap-de-ville, from Chatham itself, from Point Coco. Some children may come from as far as Coromandel and Gonzales and Granville, but you have these children cramped in a very small location. So it saddens me, and I am sure it will sadden every citizen to know that this year not a protest from the parents or the children. It means that



they have given up on their Government because they believe that the Government does not care about the education of children in this country. [*Desk thumping*]

Now, this causes logistical problems when the parents now have to leave from Chatham and wherever they are from and traverse the horrible roads to Warden Road. And, Madam President, I feel ashamed to be a Trinidadian today. I went for the first time to Maqueripe Bay because I had to go to Chaguaramas and the roads are smooth. I counted not a single pothole, but if you have to drive from Cap-de-ville junction to that school just in Point Fortin, a seven-minute drive, 100 will be a smaller number than the number of potholes that you will have to cross over just to get to that school, a seven-minute drive. It is the worst road in the entire country and that is where the oil comes from. So this Government should be ashamed, and that is a PNM constituency.

The school is basically complete in Chatham. The students in Southern Gardens—because Point Fortin received three new housing developments: Southern Gardens, Hubert's Town, and Lake View. Lake View completed by Kamla Persad-Bissessar; Hubert's Town started by Kamla Persad-Bissessar and advanced significantly; Southern Gardens was done way before that. So, Kamla Persad-Bissessar decided to offer an ECCE for the Southern Gardens families, and they are being denied a preschool centre. We have a situation now, because of not having access to this Chatham Government Primary and Fanny Village, children in primary school—children in preschools are staying until the age of seven, Madam President, before they enter primary school where they would enter at Standard 1, the age of seven.

The inability of students to access primary school education in Point Fortin puts further financial burden on parents. I witnessed firsthand when I went to drop my daughter to preschool, for the first time this year, parents being turned away

because they could not afford the \$400 a month and many of these parents would have had to carry their children to primary school, because they are of the legal age to do so, but there are no spaces for them. So you are putting a further burden on these parents—\$400 for the classes, \$300 for the meals, almost \$10,000 a year when they simply were entitled to a primary school place.

So, Madam President, I am a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, and I am also someone who was born and raised in Point Fortin for the early part of my childhood. I went to Point Fortin ASJA Primary School and I went to Ms. Yuille Private School and I understand the importance of the quality of education for children in Point Fortin and the importance persons place on that education. So, to me, it is untenable that in 2018 when the parents protested, the Minister in the Ministry of Education, Minister Lovell Francis, said that they are in the process of identifying funds to complete the school—just 5 per cent to be completed. Madam President, that was August 2018. Not a word was said from then to now. Not a thing was done to advance.

How much money can it be to find to pay the contractor that they could not find? How much money, Madam President? Let us be realistic with ourselves. This is not politics. These are the lives and destiny of our children in this country. [*Desk thumping*] So when you have the former Parent-Teacher Association President, Denise Williams, quoted in the Express article on August 18<sup>th</sup> “Chatham parents frustrated over incomplete school” saying that since 2015—this is Denise Williams saying:

“...since 2015 no work has been done as the contractor has not been paid.

She said the pupils are cramped classrooms separated by black-boards, which was not a conducive and healthy learning”

I went myself to the Early Childhood Care Centre, Madam President, in Southern

Gardens, and it is embarrassing, because you have children in Standards 4 and 5 cramped up. They almost literally have to climb over each other just to get out of their desks and back into their desks. They have to walk through other classes of students to go to the washrooms, which were meant for toddlers, two and a half year old to five year old, but you have children at the age of 11, 12 and 13 jamming up in these circumstances.

And, you know, I promised the Standard 5 teacher in that school, Madam President, that I will arrange for them to come to Parliament, but I want this Parliament to first say, this Government to first say when and to actually deliver the funds for their new school, because it will be too much shame for me to bring children here knowing that these are the very people who are refusing to finish their school. It is a shame for me to do that.

I think this Government owes the children of Point Fortin who are being denied an education—because they have to stay in preschool—being denied access to primary school education, they need to come clean and declare that they will find this money to ensure the children get the education they deserve. I so submit.  
[Desk thumping]

**7.15 p.m.**

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Thank you very much, Madam President. Nothing I say in response to my friend Sen. Obika should diminish the difficulties the parents and the students of Chatham Government Primary School have faced. I know what it is like by the way, because when I was in Standard 5 we went through a similar situation, and it is uncomfortable for young children. It is disruptive for parents and the Government understands that.

But my friends like to quote newspaper articles and very selectively. So you

have shared a headline and I will share two with you. One headline, May 31, 2017, *Trinidad Guardian*:

“AG, MoF audit probing EFCL”

And one from June 08, 2016, *Trinidad Guardian*:

“Two audits turn up several irregularities: EFCL board fires five”

The Government and this administration did not take a decision to suffer children and parents in this country. The fact is that, and we have said this very clearly to the public, when we came in, we met debts which were mounting. We met debts which were on the way. We met unpaid contractors, and we met construction arrangements which were clearly overpriced and most likely corrupt.

You do not send five senior employees home from EFCL without there being a serious problem. And the reason I am talking about EFCL is that is the special purpose company set up to do school construction in this country.

So met with a significant—and I do not know why my friends have difficulty in understanding that there was a collapse of the revenue stream in this country, not under the PNM, under you. You just spent two years in denial. But hours into office we recognized that we had a significant problem, that you were funding major projects, including the highway to Point Fortin, you were funding it out of recurrent expenditure. You had not borrowed. You had not entered into long-term borrowing for it. You had not entered into low interest borrowing which was available. You had not taken out bonds to fund that. You were funding it out of recurrent. As recurrent expenditure you were funding it out of revenues. And if 80 per cent of your revenue stream disappears, it is not business as usual. So the Government has been dealing with questionable contracts, questionable arrangements, but also trying to prioritize and trying to use the funds which are available and use the borrowing arrangements which are available to fund the

completion of some of these schools.

The Minister of Education has said several times that Chatham is a priority school. Chatham has been at 79 per cent completion. And you want to know why the parents and the students are not protesting? Because they know the Government has settled \$14 million in debt to that contractor. We have put ourselves now in a position where the contractor can resume work, having been paid. That is not \$14 million incurred under this administration, you know. That is \$14 million we met on one school in this country. There are many more primary schools. There are many more secondary schools.

There is the hospital in Point Fortin that did not have a borrowing arrangement to support the construction. It was being funded out of recurrent. We met a contract for a hospital in Arima that did not have a borrowing arrangement. The intention was to fund it out of recurrent. So schools, hospitals, road, highway, all to be funded from a pool that disappeared under your watch, and we met it dwindling.

But the debt has been paid. The \$14 million owed to the contractor has been paid. The contractor is preparing to remobilize and to complete the school, and the Government will continue to find ways and to find means, even if it means—because you like to talk about debt to GDP ratio—having to borrow to fund the completion of these projects.

I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Senate adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 7.19 p.m.*