

SENATE*Tuesday, June 23, 2020*

The Senate met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]**CHAMBER SEATING ARRANGEMENT****(REVERSION OF)**

Madam President: Hon. Senators, you may recall that on May the 1st, 2020, I announced my decision to reduce the number of persons allowed in the Chamber due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Further to the relaxation of several restriction measures, we will now revert to the Chamber seating arrangements made on March the 17th, 2020, which allowed for Senators to remain in the Chamber while observing the physical distancing protocol. As a result, the three-minute period allowing Members to return to the Chamber for divisions will no longer apply. However, we will continue to observe all other safety protocols, and once again, I want to thank all Senators for your continued cooperation.

PAPERS LAID

1. Annual Administrative Report of the Accreditation Council of Trinidad and Tobago for the period October 01, 2016 to September 30, 2017. [*The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan)*]
2. Civil Proceedings (Amendment) (No. 2) Rules, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
3. Family Proceedings (Amendment) (No. 2) Rules, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
4. Children Court (Amendment) (No. 2) Rules, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]
5. Criminal Procedure (Amendment) Rules, 2020. [*Sen. The Hon. F. Khan*]

UNREVISED

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT
Land and Physical Infrastructure
Flood Alleviation/Control Measures re Flooding
(Presentation)

Sen. Deeroop Teemal: Madam President, I have the honour to present the following report as listed on the Order Paper in my name:

Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure, Fifth Session (2019/2020), Eleventh Parliament, on an Inquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago subjected to Major Flooding over the Past Years.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE REPORTS
(Presentation)

National Library and Information System of Trinidad and Tobago

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

Twenty-Ninth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an Examination into the Audited Financial Statements of the National Library and Information System of Trinidad and Tobago (NALIS) for the financial years 2009 to 2011, and the Authority's Expenditure and Internal Controls for the years 2009 to 2018.

Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries

Thirtieth Report of the Public Accounts Committee on an Examination of the concerns raised in the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the Financial Years 2016, 2017 and 2018 with specific reference to the Ministry of Energy and

Energy Industries (MEEI) and follow up on the implementation of the recommendations in the Fourth, Fourteenth and Twentieth Reports of the Public Accounts Committee.

URGENT QUESTION

International Bond Offering

(Allocation of)

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, to the Minister of Finance: Given the Government's announcement that it has successfully raised US \$500 million in an international bond offering, can the Minister indicate how will said money be allocated?

Madam President: Minister of Finance, you have two minutes. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, the US \$500 million that was raised on the international market yesterday in 3 hours and 45 minutes was intended and is intended for two purposes. US \$250 million of the money raised will be used to refinance a US \$250 million bond that is maturing this month. That bond was attracting interest or required payment of interest at a rate of 9.75 per cent. The Minister of Finance was able to refinance this facility at a rate of 4.5 per cent, resulting in an annual cost savings to Trinidad and Tobago of \$89million, or over the life of the refinancing, a cost saving to the country of \$890 million. [*Desk thumping*]

May I also say that notwithstanding all of the inaccuracies that are found inside and outside of this honourable place, particularly within the media and the commentators and the go-to experts, it was a fantastic achievement for the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago in the midst of a COVID-19 pandemic and a collapse of oil prices to be able to have a bond issue oversubscribed by 219 per

cent in 3 hours and 45 minutes. Madam President, we launched at 8.30 a.m. and by 12.00 noon we had raised over \$1.5 billion in high quality offers, and that is US \$1 billion. The other \$250 million, as indicated in my presentations in this House, would be used for budget support.

Madam President: Minister, your time has expired. Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Can I ask the hon. Minister, the US 250 loan referred to for refinancing purposes, can the Minister outline the particular loan that would be liquidated as a result of this mechanism?

Madam President: Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam President, I do not have those details. What I can tell you, however, that the issue date was under the UNC in July of 2000 where the UNC Government borrowed US \$250 million at an interest rate of 9.75 per cent. We have reduced that interest rate now to 4.5 per cent, and I want to repeat that this PNM administration, this Government, and this Minister of Finance has saved the country \$89 million a year in interest costs by refinancing a UNC loan from the year 2000. And I want to repeat that our bond issue was oversubscribed by 200 per cent in 3 hours and 45 minutes.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, may I ask the Minister whether his Ministry conducted any due diligence on the particular bank, Credit Suisse, that raised this US \$500 million, given the fact that there is evidence out of the United States that this bank was indicted for corruption and money laundering?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, that question does not arise.

Hon. C. Imbert: And that is also untrue. Usual mauvais langue behaviour—

Madam President: Minister, Minister, please, I have not allowed the question.

Hon. C. Imbert: That is all right—

Madam President: No, no, it is not all right.

Sen. Mark: No, you cannot say it is all right.

Madam President: Minister, it is not all right. Let us just move on, please.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, the Government is pleased to announce that it would be answering Question Nos. 141, 142 and 166. We ask for a deferral of two weeks for Question Nos. 132, 143 and 167.

Madam President: Question No. 132?

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan: Yes, 132.

Madam President: Question 143 and 167—questions are deferred for two weeks.
Sen. Mark.

The following questions stood on the Order Paper:

Coronavirus Effects on the National Economy (Measures to Address)

132. Could the hon. Minister of Finance state:

Given the views expressed by leading economists that the coronavirus poses a serious threat to the national economy, can the hon. Minister advise as to what measures are being contemplated to address this potential problem?

[*Sen. W. Mark*]

Meeting with Vice-President of Venezuela (Details of)

143. Could the hon. Prime Minister state:

In light of growing public demand for Government's transparency and accountability in respect of the meeting between the Prime Minister and the Vice-President of Venezuela at the Diplomatic Centre, can the Prime

Minister provide the Senate with all documents including the agenda and minutes of said meeting and the names of all officials involved in the discussions? [*Sen. W. Mark*]

**World Bank Public Expenditure Review 2019
(Progress re Implementation of)**

167. Could the hon. Minister of Finance state:

Following the recommendations provided by the World Bank in its Public Expenditure Review in 2019, can the Minister indicate what progress has been made in implementing these recommendations? [*Sen. A. Deonarine*]

Questions, by leave, deferred.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can you guide me once again, what questions am I—

Madam President: Your first question will be 141.

Sen. Mark: Question No. 141?

Madam President: Yes.

Sen. Mark: And thereafter?

Madam President: Question Nos. 141, 142, and those are your questions.

Sen. Mark: Okay. Right. Thank you.

**COVID-19 “Step Down” Facilities
(Names of)**

141. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Can the hon. Minister name all the locations that have been or are being used as COVID-19 “step down” facilities?

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, the locations currently being used as “step down” facilities for COVID-19 are the

Home of Football-Wellness Centre in Couva and the Sangre Grande Brooklyn Centre. I thank you.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can I ask the hon. Minister what is the current status as it relates to this particular “step down” facility in Sangre Grande? What is the current status?

Madam President: No, that question is not allowed.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask, is that facility actively engaged at this time with warm bodies, Madam President, that particular “step down” facility?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, that question does not arise based on the question asked and the answer given.

Sen. Mark: Can I ask the hon. Minister, what is the arrangement involved concerning these two “step down” facilities, particularly the one in Sangre Grande, in terms of financial arrangements?

Madam President: No, that question does not arise either, Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Okay. Can I go on to 142?

Madam President: Yes.

Paria Trading Company Limited

(Shipment of Fuel to Aruba)

142. Sen. Wade Mark asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:
Can the Minister indicate whether an investigation has been launched into the circumstances surrounding a shipment of fuel sold by Paria Trading Company Limited being allegedly transferred to Venezuela after reaching its intended destination in Aruba?

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): Madam President, from mathematical terms, for the Nth time I make this statement. State-owned Paria Fuel Trading Company Limited has, as its main

activity, the importation and marketing of petroleum products, that is gasoline, diesel, jet fuel and bunker fuel in the domestic market and also to regional markets in accordance with their requirements. The company has been supplying these fuels for these markets following its incorporation in October 2018.

The FOB sale of gasoline to ES Euro Shipping SA was a standard commercial transaction through a bona fide client after the normal due diligence process was completed. Transfer of ownership changed with the sale of the product and accordingly Paria has no further interest in the transaction. Therefore, there is nothing to investigate and there are no plans to so do.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, can the Minister indicate whether he is aware that a shipment of 200,000 barrels of gasoline was imported into this country two weeks before the actual shipment left for Aruba?

Madam President: No, I would not allow that question, Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Madam President, the hon. Minister said that there was normal due diligence conducted on transactions by this company called Paria Fuel Trading Company. Can the Minister indicate in the case of that particular shipment involving the actors and players, what were the elements that comprised this due diligence that was conducted?

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan: Madam President, Paria Fuel Trading Company issued a comprehensive release, a press release that is, on the 20th of May which included all the details of that due diligence process. But to recap, it is normal due diligence. We checked the company, we checked where it is registered, we checked with shareholders; we checked the directors to see whether there was any lien on their assets and matters pertaining thereto. So that is standard procedure

when you are dealing in the trading business and when companies come to seek purchases from your assets. So I think everything was done. The press release was issued on the 20th of May, so there is nothing further to add.

Madam President: Sen. Mark.

Sen. Mark: Yes. Can the hon. Minister indicate to this House whether he is aware that out of the 200,000 barrels of gasoline that would have been imported two weeks before a shipment to Aruba that the main player involved in this transaction was a gentleman by the name of Mr. Wilmer Ruperti?

Madam President: Sen. Mark, that question is not allowed.

Sen. Mark: Can I also ask, Madam President, whether the Minister is aware that the shipment of that oil or gas that arrived and was stored in a tank on the Pointe-a-Pierre compound originated out of Algeria? Is the Minister aware of this?

Madam President: And that question does not arise. Next question, Sen. Deonarine.

Population Census 2017

(Completion of)

166. Sen. Amrita Deonarine asked the hon. Minister of Planning and Development:

In light of ongoing social distancing measures currently being adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, can the Minister advise on the contingency plans for ensuring the timely completion of the Population Census due in 2021?

The Minister of Labour and Small Enterprise Development (Sen. The Hon. Jennifer Baptiste-Primus): Madam President, I rise on behalf of my colleague, the Minister in the Ministry of Planning and Development to deliver this response. In view of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic with respect to new guidelines

and social interaction, the Central Statistical Office is exploring the use of technology which would include telephone interviews, online questionnaires, mail-in questionnaires and limited face-to-face interviews. The CSO at present is participating in ongoing dialogue with regional and international statistical institutions to consider and develop suitable methodologies. Support is also being explored with the Inter-American Development Bank and the Government of Canada through the project for the regional advancement of statistics in the Caribbean towards these initiatives. Thank you, Madam President.

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine.

Sen. Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President. Thank you to the hon. Minister for her response. I have a follow-up question: Is consideration being given to conducting the adequate training to the staff who would have to be conducting these new methods of collecting information from the general public for this mass census?

Madam President: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. J. Baptiste-Primus: Madam President, while I do not have the precise information, I could say without fear of being challenged that any such exercise will engage the training needs of the persons involved.

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine, yes.

Sen. Deonarine: Thank you, Madam President. Hon. Minister, if you may, could you advise us on plans for public sensitization to ensure that the response rate for this new method of applying the census to the population is widely accepted and we have a high response rate?

Madam President: Sen. Deonarine, I would not allow that question. Anymore? No?

MISCELLANEOUS AMENDMENTS (NO. 2) BILL, 2020

Bill to amend the Summary Courts Act, Chap. 4:20, the Petty Civil Courts Act, Chap. 4:21, the Sentencing Commission Act, Chap. 4:32, the Judicial and Legal Service Act, Chap. 6:01, the Malicious Damage Act, Chap. 11:06, the Coinage Offences Act, Chap. 11:15, the Sexual Offences Act, Chap. 11:28, the Indictable Offences (Preliminary Enquiry) Act, Chap. 12:01, the Community Service Orders Act, Chap. 13:06, the Defence Act, Chap. 14:01, the Firearms Act, Chap. 16:01, the Explosives Act, Chap. 16:02, the Registrar General Act, Chap. 19:03, the Cinematograph Act, Chap. 20:10, the Registration of Clubs Act, Chap. 21:01, the Theatres and Dance Halls Act, Chap. 21:03, the Electronic Transactions Act, Chap. 22:05, the Elections and Boundaries Commission (Local Government and Tobago House of Assembly) Act, Chap. 25:50, the Mental Health Act, Chap. 28:02, the Children Act, Chap. 46:01, the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Act, Chap. 48:50, the Conservation of Wild Life Act, Chap. 67:01, the Value Added Tax Act, Chap. 75:06, the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01, the Liquor Licences Act, Chap. 84:10, the Administration of Justice (Indictable Proceedings) Act, 2011, the Criminal Division and District Criminal and Traffic Courts Act, 2018 and the Electronic Payments into and out of Court Act, 2018 [*The Attorney General*]; read the first time.

Madam President: Leader of Government Business.

Motion made, That the next stage be taken on Monday, June 29, 2020. [*Hon. F. Khan*]

Question put and agreed to.

Marilissa Farms Limited/General Earth Movers Limited**(Tabling of Lease Agreement)**

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, I beg to

move the following Motion standing in my name:

Whereas the Government has, by virtue of a lease agreement, assigned interest in excess of one thousand acres to the owner of General Earth Movers Limited /Marilissa Farms Limited for the use of a livestock station;
Be it resolved that the Senate call on the Government to take steps to ensure that the rich aggregate on the said acreage of the leased lands is protected;
And be it further resolved that this Senate call on the Government to table, within fourteen days, the lease agreement between Marilissa Farms Limited/General Earth Movers Limited and the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Madam President, this is a very serious matter that I am about to debate and present to this honourable Senate. No one can argue that there is need for a revolution in agriculture, and livestock production is a very critical element in that whole matrix. So when we learnt of this development, we were of the view that there is some merit in what the Government is doing. What we had challenges with is the method and the manner in which it was done. The Government, Madam President, indicated that they were pursuing a public/private partnership in the context of this initiative, and as such private investors were sought to partner with the Government to revamp the Aripo Livestock Station. Our information, Madam President, reveals that there were some 13 expressions of interest, and out of the 13 expressions of interest some five companies bid for the Aripo Livestock Station. The five were as follows: Marilissa Farms, Khan's Organic Products, UWI, CDC Group of Companies and Agri-Fusion Limited.

Madam President, Marilissa Farms, which is owned by one Mr. Lincoln Thackorie, was successful in the final round. The question that we raise and we

would like to get clarification on, and there are several questions we would want to get clarification on, the process that was used apparently, Madam President, ranked, as well as ranked the appropriate person or organization that would have eventually won and negotiation proceeded thereafter. Unconfirmed reports, which the Minister would need to clarify, stated that no committee was formed or any proper procurement processes followed. The Cabinet took the decision to award this particular lease to this company or farm known as Marilissa Farms.

We wish to ask the hon. Minister the following questions and we are hoping that we will get some answers. What were the criteria used for the selection of these bidders? How come out of the 13 expressions of interest a known PNM farmer is the only one that won the bid? What are the terms and conditions of this lease? Is it that this one company is being given 1,146 acreages of land? Madam President, why is it that this large acreage of land owned by the people of Trinidad and Tobago is being given or leased to one company? Is the land being given as a lease for a period of time, and if so, Madam President, for how long? Is it that the company is paying the Government for the land, and if so, how much, or is it a gift? What, Madam President, is going to happen to the persons who were there before, that is, the workers? We understand they have all been removed and placed elsewhere.

We would also like, Madam President, to ask the Minister what will happen to the pasteurized milk unit on the farm which would have been constructed and established sometime between 2010 and 2015 at a cost of close to \$15 million. Madam President, we understand that this operation is supposed to focus on the rearing of sheep and goat and other ruminants. So, we would like some of these questions to be answered.

So, Madam President, what is this farm called Marilissa Farms? Madam President, as I said, we understand from research that this farm is owned by one Mr. Lincoln Thackorie who is also a major shareholder of the family business known as General Earth Movers Limited, a company incorporated sometime in the mid-80s. Marilissa Farms is currently located or situated in Penal and is primarily a sheep and goat farm.

2.00 p.m.

It is the largest sheep and goat farm, from my information, in Trinidad and Tobago, and can house more than 6,000 heads of animals, and represents between 30 and 40 per cent of this country's total annual production of sheep and goat, giving it a great degree of dominance in the industry. The owner of this farm imports very expensive prized breeders that can cost as much as \$25,000 per head. As I said they have the largest sheep and goat farm as well as the goat milk industry in Trinidad and Tobago, Madam President.

Madam President, what peaked my interest is that during the period 2019, the hon. Prime Minister went on a tour of several farms in Trinidad. One of those farms apparently was this Marilissa Farms located in Penal. Further research revealed why this took place. My information and my research has led me to the conclusion, based on facts, that the hon. Prime Minister is also involved in the goat and sheep business in Tobago, and actually has the largest goat and sheep farm in Tobago, nestling on over or close to 100 acres of land.

My research has also led me to conclude, based on information which can always be clarified, that this farm is very commercially active, that is, the farm in Tobago—I think it was the Latour Estate at one time—and meat is now being sold from that farm to the local market both in Trinidad and Tobago. I have evidence to

prove that the hon. Prime Minister is an active member and financial member of the sheep and goat society in Trinidad and Tobago, and he pays his dues annually.

Madam President, I would like to ask certain questions. The Aripo farm is owned by the people of Trinidad and Tobago, and as I said it sits on some 1,146 acres of valuable land. Now, the Government, for some strange reason, deliberately ran down the facility and, as such, this farm became almost inactive for some years leaving it available for the kind of activities that we recently experienced, that is, seeking a public/private partnership. But we are submitting that there is need for transparency and accountability in the exercise involving this lease arrangement. We would like the Minister again to tell us how they went about choosing a suitable bidder, and thereby clear the air on this matter.

Madam President, the farm has now been leased to Marilissa Farms. We understand that the objective is to establish a large scale cattle farm producing cattle production in the form of beef, cheese and milk. The project has started, and there are animals on the farm as we speak. The facilities and the milk dairy is being repaired and upgraded. We understand that there are close to 100 workers currently on site, and that could potentially reach maybe 1,000 persons in the future.

For all intents and purposes, it seems like a very good project with significant investment from Mr. Lincoln Thackorie who is the owner of Marilissa Farms. However, the question still stands as to what was the arrangement entered between the Government and Marilissa Farms. What are the fees involved? Did the Government invest any money in this project?

As I said, there is in fact a milk pasteurized project on the farm, and it cost the taxpayers close to \$15 million to \$17 million. We would like to know whether

a share of the profits would be contributed or would be allocated to Trinidad and Tobago and the taxpayers, or would all the profits be absorbed by Marilissa Farms. Has that farm, Marilissa Farms body or company, been asked to engage local employees, or are they engaging in the importation of labour? We would like to know what direct benefits will accrue to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago from the valuable asset literally given away to one person.

So, Madam President, on the surface it appears that the Government has proceeded with this particular project without any transparency as it relates to the public, and the entire process of awarding of this valuable asset apparently, from the research that has been done, was taken by the Cabinet of this country and there was no proper procurement process in place.

What we are concerned about is that the Government is allocating so many hundreds of acres of land to one individual rather than creating a host of small farmers who can in fact, at the end of the day, realize a great opportunity to earn a living or to partake productively in this project once it was properly executed. So we need answers from the Government, because what is taking place is a monopoly is being built, is being constructed at this time, and there is need for the Government to clear the air on this matter.

Madam President, 90 per cent of this farm has what is called rich aggregate. There is need for the Government to clear the air on what would take place under this new arrangement to our rich aggregate. We understand that the Aripo Livestock Station, which is now leased to Marilissa Farms, is owned by General Earth Movers Limited, a construction company that is involved in road construction, in paving of roads, in the construction of bridges, among other activities. Therefore, we are asking the Government to explain to this Parliament

what will become of these acreages of limestone that is now under the control of Mr. Lincoln Thackorie. Whether this lease of Marilissa Farms would give General Earth Movers Limited the access and authority to hundreds of acres of limestone, which would be a crime against the population of this country. Madam President, I am seeking answers from the Government on this matter.

We are yet to have a lease made available to the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. That is why we have asked that within 14 days of this debate that the Government moves swiftly to table that lease agreement so that the country, the public, the taxpayers, would know about the terms and conditions of this lease.

Madam President, many Government high-ranking officials seem to have chosen the wrong profession. They are in this business of politics but when you check their backgrounds in the last four and a half years they have become very entrepreneurial. They are into commercial businesses behind the scenes. Madam President, we will be able to bring to the country's attention and to your attention these elements, these individuals who have become superrich in the last four and a half years. I would not want to spend time giving you a detailed appreciation of what is going on in the sister isle of Tobago. Some of our people who are now high-ranking officials in this Government have now become land developers. They have now become builders of properties, competing with the HDC. Palaces on the hills of Tobago are being constructed at millions and millions of dollars.

This is why when we saw this transaction taking place, and we realized the close relationship between this farmer from Marilissa Farms—Madam President, I have in my possession which I can circulate to you and to Members here where the Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago visited the Marilissa Farms. I am saying the time is going to come very shortly when we are going to be

calling for a forensic enquiry into this transaction, because I have been informed, and the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries must indicate if I am wrong, that that farm in Tobago which started in 2016 now has close to 4,000 heads of sheep and goats.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, this is your Motion and I am giving you the flexibility, but you still have to be relevant to your Motion. Okay?

Sen. W. Mark: Yes. So, Madam President, we are dealing with a situation—

Madam President: Sen. Mark, you have five more minutes.

Sen. W. Mark: We are dealing with a situation in which you have a relationship. I would like to ask the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries whether there exists a relationship between Marilissa Farms, Lincoln Thackorie who is the owner, and that farm in Latour Tobago, and the Leader of the Government who is the owner of that farm. I would like to know if you can clear the air on that.

So, Madam President, we have no difficulty in anyone getting involved in business, but what we have a problem with is politicians using resources of the people to promote their own private interests. We have a problem with that. [*Desk thumping*] That is the problem that we have here, and this is why we are saying that this matter of the Marilissa Farms might appear to be innocent.

But there is more, Madam President. This gentleman is now in charge of our Aripo Livestock Station, and he is going to be involved in cattle production, making him a very dominant player in the meat industry, in the cheese industry, in the milk industry.

Sen. Gopee-Scoon: Nothing is wrong with that.

Sen. W. Mark: Nothing is wrong with that, but we as the people, we as Senators must have sight of the lease agreement. We must be able to know what are the

terms and conditions of this arrangement. We must know what relationship exists, if any, between the Prime Minister and Lincoln Thackorie. We need to know that because in Tobago the largest farm is owned by him, and in Trinidad the largest farm is owned by Lincoln Thackorie. So all I am saying, these are matters that are crying out for some answers and the Government must come clean. We have done our research. We continue to do our research. And even though they may try to dance and bob and weave and give us nancy stories, we are digging and we are getting behind the truth.

I know I do not have much time, but I would like to know in closing whether this Marilissa Farms, which is owned by General Earth Movers Limited, whether the owner of that farm in the last four years has been the recipient of rich contracts for road construction running into the tens of millions of dollars. I would like the hon. Minister to indicate to us whether he is aware that this company that owns Marilissa Farms that is involved in the construction business, whether that company has received awards of contracts worth tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions of dollars in the last few years. We want to get answers from the Government on this matter, because at the end of the day the people are suffering whilst a few are prospering, living nice, at the expense of the people.

But I am so happy that we are going to have an election shortly, [*Desk thumping*] so that we would be able to unmask all of them in this country for the public to see. We have enough evidence, not only on this matter, but as the Auditor General has indicated, she is investigating the acquisition of two ferries and two K-class vessels. We too are investigating that. We know what is going on; nobody can mamaguy us on these matters.

So, Madam President, I would like answers to this Motion. The Minister of

Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, unfortunately he seems not to be active in agriculture. I looked at the pictures involving the—

[Madam President signals to Sen. Mark]

Yes. In closing, I looked at the tour of these farms. I looked for the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, he was nowhere to be seen.

Madam President, I beg to move.

Madam President: Yes, thank you very much. This Motion needs to be seconded.

Sen. Ameen: Thank you very much, Madam President. I beg to second this Motion and I wish to reserve my right to speak at a later time in the debate.

Madam President: The Motion has been seconded by Sen. Ameen. Hon. Senators, I will now propose the question for debate.

Question proposed.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you, Madam President. At best, this Motion is frivolous—at best. At worst, it is ridiculous. This is no more than a cheap amateurish shot at the hon. Prime Minister. At a minimum, if Sen. Mark or anybody else wish to obtain documentation in respect of this particular private/public partnership, at a minimum the freedom of information process is available to him. But, Sen. Mark is a parliamentarian, so he does not have to go the route of the FOI. This is why I describe this as nothing more than a coward taking a cheap shot at the hon. Prime Minister. This is not about livestock. This is not about aggregate.

Sen. Obika: Madam President, I rise on Standing Order 46(1) and 46(6).

Madam President: Minister, could you just refine your language please.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Madam President, cowards behave like this,

because I will tell you why. This matter involves land.

Sen. Obika: Madam President, it pains me. I rise again on Standing Order 46(1) and 46(6).

Madam President: Minister, continue.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: This matter involves land, and a substantial acreage of land if I may say so, 1,176 acres. There is a committee of the Parliament set up to deal with matters of land. It is called the “Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure”. Sen Mark sits as a member of that committee. Madam President, in the four years and eight months I have been a Member of this Parliament, that committee has conducted several enquiries, but I will tell you that three of those enquiries related directly to the matter of land in Trinidad and Tobago.

The first report of that committee dealt with an enquiry into land tenure issues in Trinidad and Tobago. At that time, Sen. Mark, the Opposition in committee, had the opportunity to enquire into this transaction. Even if the transaction was not completed, the committee had the opportunity to summon the Ministry and to summon me as Minister as a follow-up to the report to answer questions relating to this matter.

There was a second enquiry, an enquiry into the allocation and utilization of State lands for food production. Well, this transaction fits squarely into that. So if Sen. Mark sits in the highest body in this country, in the Parliament on a committee dealing with land and infrastructure, and sits on an enquiry into the use of state land for food production, you would think that Sen. Mark would use the length and breadth and width of that committee. He would not have been constrained as he was today. He would not have been confined to the terms of his Motion. But he

did not use the opportunity, because that committee, apart from being televised, he had the full power to summon the Ministry and the Minister to conduct a broad enquiry into this transaction, if he was serious about enquiring into it. But he was not.

This Motion has been framed for all sorts of purposes, and I will get to some of what he said. There is a third report of that committee dealing with strategies for diversifying the type and number of agricultural commodities for diversification—diversifying agriculture—so this would have fitted squarely into that. And there was a fourth report of that JSC.

So my first point in responding is that this Motion is frivolous at best, and there were several opportunities open to my colleague if he wanted to enquire into it, if he wanted to get documentation, if he wanted to hold the Ministry accountable or the Minister accountable, he had that opportunity to do that.

The second point is this. Sen. Mark has spoken. On the one hand, he has described a process. In his Motion he has spoken about an EOI, expression of interest. He has spoken about 13 persons attending the site visits. He has spoken about five bids being received, and then says no committee was formed and there was no proper procurement policy. Sen. Mark has set out the process, and I will provide the details of it. I will provide the details of it.

Madam President, in opening he has said he has challenges. He has used the universal “we”. He said we had challenges with the method and manner. When Sen. Mark said that, all that came back to me was this SIS/NGC arrangement for the Beetham waste water. I wonder if he had challenges, if the universal “we” had any challenges to that. That that contract went to the second bid went to a bid that was more than \$100million higher than the first bid, for which a payment, a

significant payment, was made in advance, in a project that is now abandoned and has left pipes strewn from Beetham down to Carli Bay in Couva. I wonder if he had this challenge with this transaction that I will detail. I wonder if he had problems with the method and manner of the engagement of SIS in that transaction, and I am only referring to one. [*Desk thumping*] What was his mindset then?

2.30 p.m.

As I say, Madam President, this Motion is frivolous at best and ridiculous. This is the process, Madam President, it did not fall from the sky and this process did not belong to the Cabinet. Cabinet did not make a decision or conduct any activities except the activities they were asked to consider in the context of a process.

And I will start by saying, Madam President, when I was appointed Minister, the state of the livestock sector was no secret to me. I had previously worked in Caroni Limited, the owner of the largest and operator of the largest livestock farms in the country. I had been familiar with what had been happening at Mora Valley, for example, Mora Valley on Guayaguayare Road, Rio Claro.

Madam President, Sen. Mark would not know that used to be called “the plantation”, and my parents lived there, my father worked there as a labourer, and I grew up knowing the farm. I grew up knowing La Gloria in New Grant and through Caroni, I was familiar and remained familiar with livestock in this country.

So by November 2015, I had determined that we needed to conduct a diagnostic analysis of the livestock sector to determine what as a government and what as a country we should be doing. Because by the time I was appointed, Madam President, for example, this country had been living with brucellosis for

more than 20 years and brucellosis is something that affects livestock, that is treatable, that should have been dealt with in the initial stages, and had long languished and affected in particular that once pristine and prestigious buffalypso herd in Mora Valley. So I wanted to know, Madam President, because I knew upon my appointment that my colleagues on the other side, when they were in Government, had received from PAHO in 2013 a very detailed report pointing to the critical need for Trinidad and Tobago to deal with brucellosis once and for all, so I wanted this diagnostic done. And from November 2015, Madam President, to late 2016, the Ministry went through the process of preparing and selecting somebody to conduct this diagnostic, and that was the first step.

The second step was the engagement of Prof. Marlon Knights to conduct the exercise, and Marlon Knights is not new and he is not unknown. He is a graduate of the University of the West Indies, he has worked in the Ministry previously, he has worked at UTT previously, and at the time, he was working as a professor in the livestock area in the United States. And he came during the course of late 2016 into 2017 to conduct this exercise which took several months and several meetings and several site visits, and so on, and in December 2017, Prof. Knights rendered his report to me as Minister.

Having looked and reviewed the report with Prof. Knights, Madam President, in March 2018, having presented the report to the Cabinet, the Cabinet considered and approved the recommendations in the report. And, Madam President, among the—Prof. Knights conducted a review of the Ministry itself and its livestock operations and the private sector including Marilissa Farms, which Sen. Mark acknowledges, is the largest and most successful livestock farm in the country, and there were 10 key recommendations.

Among the facilities—and this report is very detailed, it analyzed each facility, each livestock facility, each livestock operation of the Ministry with the exception of the core vet services being offered by the Ministry, and I will come to that particular aspect, and there were 10 key recommendations of that report. And the first was to realign the livestock activities in the Ministry to ensure that there was no duplication. One of the findings was that the Ministry across the country was involved in similar exercises and that there was duplication.

But secondly, Madam President, the second recommendation was that the Ministry should engage in strategic private/public sector initiatives, including medium-scale beef and buffalo or small ruminant operations on underutilized Ministry farms, dairy processing using existing processing plants at Sugarcane Feeds Centre and Aripo Livestock Station, and value added or retained ownership programmes, and there are eight other recommendations, Madam President. So, Madam President, it is this report, December 2017 report, submitted to Cabinet in early 2018, and approved by Cabinet in March 2018, that contained among several recommendations in respect of every aspect of livestock operations within the Ministry and outside the Ministry and in the private sector.

The second recommendation was in respect of private/public partnerships for the existing facilities in the Ministry, particularly those which are underutilized. And Sen. Mark says that we, the Government, deliberately ran down Aripo. Madam President, 1,176 acres of land over a period of time with 105 daily-paid employees and 14 technical staff had become—had been relegated to a farm with less than 500 head of animals conducting research activity, that was it, and plagued by theft and loss of animals and loss of assets, that is what Aripo had become.

And Sen. Mark, you know, he did not even realize that his government had

the audacity, they had the audacity, what is now the detention centre, the Immigration Detention Centre, IDC, that was built on Aripo Livestock Station, that was built on the station. I as Minister and the Cabinet that I am part of had to deal with that matter to regularize. A government takes a decision to build a detention centre on a livestock station, Madam President, without any form of documentation, no survey, no lease, no anything, and Sen. Mark cannot answer that because he does not know whether the IDC is in the north-east corner, the south-east corner, under the fig tree or where it is, he does not know. If I had to ask Sen. Mark anything about that Aripo Livestock Station, he would not be able to tell me, Madam President.

He would not be able to tell me that it was under his government's watch, for example. I was surprised, Madam President, I was surprised that anybody involved in agriculture or anybody in Trinidad and Tobago— because the world knows that Aripo Livestock Station is the most significant venue for birders, people who are enthusiastic about birds, it is the number one venue. And Asa Wright Nature Centre, most of their tours are involved going to Aripo, and it is under Sen. Mark's government that that activity was stopped. And when I came in as Minister, Madam President, Asa Wright was floundering on account of that, on account of the denial of access to the bird watching facilities at Aripo.

So, Sen. Mark is not serious today, and I started off by saying that, he is not serious; he does not know Aripo; he does not know anything about Aripo. Aripo, Madam President, is a rich birding site, and this Government and I as Minister, we are committed to the preservation of the birding areas in Aripo Livestock Station, it is enshrined in our MOU with Marilissa, and it is fully supported by Marilissa, because the owners, the shareholders they understand what it is. A significant part

of Aripo, Madam President, this 1,176, a significant part is forest reserve, it cannot be touched, and the arrangement with Marilissa which is enshrined in a MOU deals with agriculture land, this has nothing to do with quarrying.

If you wanted to quarry there, it would require a series of permits and approvals, and so on. You would need CECs from the EMA, you would need a permit from the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, you would need a lot of things to be done. Because it is this Government, Madam President, it this Government that has insisted on National Quarries, for example, having the appropriate leases, licences and permits for the operation of their quarries. It is this Government, Madam President, that has ensured that EMBD which operated quarries for several years without leases, licences, permit approvals, CECs, and so on. We took a policy position that that must be put right and it is under us that those things have been put right, so that there is no risk to the citizens to anybody that Marilissa or anybody else acting on behalf of Marilissa will engage in quarrying of that site in the Aripo Livestock Station.

Madam President, so much so that when I visited the farm last week with the hon. Prime Minister, Marilissa went further and they asked me as the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to declare that 1,176-acre farm a no hunting area because as state land, it is still accessible to hunters with a permit, and there is a rich amount of wildlife on the site, and they have asked me, as we have done in other parts of the country, to ban hunting on that site.

So, Madam President, based on the approval of the Cabinet in May 2018 to seek a private sector partner for the operation of the Aripo Livestock Station, an invitation was issued in 2018, August 2018, so we are now at the third level of the process. The first level was my decision to engage the review of the sector. The

second level was the approval of the Cabinet to issue an expression of interest. The third level was the invitation, an invitation was put out there, it was in the newspapers, but before we did that, Madam President, I want to say this.

On the day before Indian Arrival Day in 2018, in May 2018, I met with the representative union, the National Union of Government and Federated Workers, NUGFW, I met with the President General Mr. Lambert and his officers, and I indicated to them what the Government intended to do. The commitment that all those persons working at Aripo would be redeployed elsewhere in the Ministry. But when I went further, Madam President, and on behalf of the Government, I offered the President General the first opportunity to put in a proposal for the operations of Aripo. Madam President, the union not only declined the invitation but indicated its non-objection to what the Government proposed to do. And it is on that basis, that during the period August 28, 2018, to October 12, 2018, the expression of interest went public.

During that period, Madam President, you had the opportunity to attend site visits and on September 15, 2018, a site visit was conducted. There were 13 participants in that site visit, Madam President. You had the opportunity to ask questions, an email account was set up and advertised for the purpose of asking questions. There were seven queries, people asked for an extension, Madam President. The process was extended to October 12, 2018. In all, there were 45 days available for bidders to submit a bid and 27 days available to site visits to be conducted, and at the end of the invitation period, Madam President, as Sen. Mark correctly recited, there were five responses for Marilissa Farms, Khan's organic meats, UWI, CDS Group of Companies and Agri-Fusion Limited.

Madam President, this is where Sen. Mark went totally off the rails. An

evaluation committee was established by the Cabinet in November 2018 and that evaluation committee reported to the Cabinet in December 2018. And I have made this point before, Madam President, on a matter of loans, and I made the point, that when you make these statements, you are interfering with the integrity of the public servants.

The evaluation committee, Madam President, was chaired by PS Vishnu Dhanpaul from the Ministry of Finance. The then Deputy Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries Farook Hosein was a member of the committee. Prof. Marlon Knights who conducted the diagnostics. Jackie Ganteaume-Farrell, a retired public servant whose expertise is in the area of agricultural lands, having worked in the Ministry previously heading that division, and having been retained by the present Government in that area in the Ministry. And Kerry Ann Harrison, the fifth person, an attorney-at-law who is a member of the board of the Agricultural Development Bank; that is the committee, Madam President. That is the committee that conducted evaluation and made a submission, submitted a report, and that is the report and recommendation that went to the Cabinet.

Madam President, on that basis, it is not just Marilissa Farms. Sen. Mark is focusing on Marilissa Farms for reasons he knows well. The second ranked candidate, Khan's organic meats, Madam President, was also offered a site. First, a site in Couva, the former part of the former livestock operations of Caroni (1975) Limited. That site proved to be unsuitable, was offered a second site that also proved to be unsuitable, and more recently, Cabinet approved Khan's organic meats being set up in La Gloria, former livestock farm owned by Caroni (1975) Limited.

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, and Khan's organic meats is a significant farm in Trinidad producing organic beef. It is in Madras, it is a 250-head animal herd, it is ripe for expansion. We sought to expand that farm using state lands around the private lands on which it is located. The Civil Aviation Authority indicated that having regard to the proximity of the flight path, they preferred that apart from not expanding, that we relocate that farm. And it is on that basis that Khan's organic meat was given the opportunity, based on the evaluation and the recommendations to Cabinet, to go on 100 acres of land in La Gloria to expand the existing farm but also, to bring back economic activity in that area.

Madam President, Marilissa's obligations—it is not anybody, we recognize that, it is not anybody who is going to be able to do what the Government wants done in Aripo or elsewhere. Livestock requires—Sen. Mark quoted some figures. An investment in livestock operations requires a significant amount of capital. He is correct in saying Marilissa imports its breeding stock.

I have been to the airport, I do not know if Sen. Mark wants to associate me with the project. I have been to Marilissa more than once, as I have been to farms across the country. I have been with the Prime Minister, I was at Aripo last week with the Prime Minister, as I am supposed to be. He is a former Minister of Agriculture and an outstanding Minister of Agriculture, he is a registered farmer. Sometimes I am happy, sometimes I am not too happy about that because he makes as much demands on me as any other farmer in the country.

And, Madam President, I am proud to have as a stakeholder in this Ministry, the Prime Minister of the country demonstrating, not only political support and

leadership support, but support at a personal level by establishing his own farm. And it is not 2015 that the Prime Minister has been in livestock farming. I dare say, when you see the Prime Minister handle a bundle of grass, Madam President, he was born to do that and he has been doing that all his life, this is nothing new.

And, Madam President, based on the site visits, based on the visit—remember we did not just go to Marilissa last week, we did not just go to livestock, we went to one of the longest established livestock farms in the country, Lucy Torres' farm in Turure. We went to Marilissa and we went to Blue Waters to see some of the technology that has been deployed, some of the investments that have been made and, Madam President, whether you like it or not, this is not squeezing out small farmers, this is making way for what everybody around world has said. [*Desk thumping*] Agriculture will develop on the strength of farming families, on small- and medium-sized farms, and on those persons with capital to invest in the manner in which investment.

Madam President, if my friends were serious— Sen. Mark talks about, “Why not divide into small acreages?” Well, Madam President, I will tell you this. If Sen. Mark and his government were interested in small acreages for livestock farmers, I would tell you, in their several terms in Government, two terms as least, not one lease in Carlsen Field, one of the prime livestock areas in the country, not one lease was renewed.

This Government, under Dr. Rowley as Prime Minister, has renewed almost every also lease in Carlsen Field [*Desk thumping*] including Shiraz Khan's lease. They renewed not one lease in Wallerfield. Under our watch, about 50 per cent of those livestock area leases, Madam President, in Wallerfield have been renewed. [*Desk thumping*] So, this Government is committed to the small, to the medium, to

the big, [*Desk thumping*] to those with money, to those with interest. Because throughout, Madam President, Sen. Mark has not attacked the capacity and capability of Marilissa Farms. He has said more in support of Marilissa than I could ever say.

Madam President, this is nothing but a cheap shot. The transparency is there, I have set it out. The information is available not only to Sen. Mark, but to anybody else but, in particular, to Sen. Mark. He sits on the Land and Physical Infrastructure Committee, he had the opportunity and what that tells me is that he has decided today to use Private Members' Day for a cheap shot at the hon. Prime Minister of this country. I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: Sen. Obika.

Sen. Taharqa Obika: Thank you, Madam President. To take off directly where the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries left is to state that this Prime Minister's most vocal comment on farming is that Trinidad and Tobago does not have enough land, and in fact, it is replicated by the actions that were so woefully defended. The aim, the attempt at defending the record of this Government in agriculture was poor in the least, hapless at best.

In fact, what we should have gotten was not only an immediate disclosure of the terms and conditions of the agreement with Marilissa Farms and the State so that the taxpayer can rest assured that, in fact, taxpayers resources were not sent down to one friend of the Government, but that, in fact, taxpayers' resources were best placed, because we know that the proof of the pudding is always in the eating, the devil is always in the detail. What lies in the detail of the agreement, this Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has absconded from his responsibility to declare and disclose this information to the Parliament, instead hiding behind a

claim that Sen. Mark could have raised it at a different fora. That is not the question of this Motion.

The question of this Motion has to do with the issues surrounding the lease agreement. The question of this Motion has to do with the questions raised by Sen. Mark regarding what exactly did the taxpayers get, what will the taxpayer be getting? Sen. Mark also raised the issue of the State, via the taxpayer, investing in equipment at the Aripo farms.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries has departed egregiously from his responsibility to the taxpayer, to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago to make sure that he can remove every shadow of any doubt that the taxpayer was not robbed of resources.

That said, there are significant and important points of focus, and it is very insightful, more than coincidental I would say, that Sen. Mark's Motion today comes on the heels of farmers seeing their lands bulldozed by agents of the State in the form of the Housing Development Corporation.

Now given the lack of a defence of a fulsome agriculture industry plan to bring farm lands up and running, we can understand why the HDC would be emboldened to bulldoze farmlands without proper respect for the farmers, and without the farmers concerns being satiated. Now, the HDC's defence, for example, in this case in a parcel of land—

Sen. Singh: Madam President, on Standing Order 46(1), relevance.

Madam President: Sen. Obika, the Motion that is before us is in respect of a specific matter transaction as cited in the Motion, so you need to stay more specific to the Motion, please.

Sen. T. Obika: The HDC lands versus—the HDC lands, I am going to draw exact

relevance at this point in time. The HDC lands that were bulldozed by agents of the Government shows lack of focus on agriculture for the mass citizenry to benefit, because the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries' defence spoke only of Marilissa Farms and mentions something in the pipeline for another farmer, just two entities in the sea of agricultural interests in this country, in the sea and the groundswell of "agripreneurs" that was birthed during the stay at home period of COVID-19. So it should have come to the HDC, for example, as no surprise that you will have new crops on the ground. This Government has shown, by virtue of this scandal at the Aripo farms, that there is no concern for citizen endeavour on a broad scale in agriculture. Because if that statement was not true, if this Government actually did care, we would not be getting a lacklustre defence of his record by the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries pointing to only one large entity getting a state site. We would actually get the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries coming here and pointing out each and every site that was a beehive of activity in agriculture and showing how the Government has made sure that there are steps in place to bring them into production.

We would not have seen the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries confine his statement only in terms to show Khan's farm, for example, with some sites that were not desirable by that entity. He would have focused on Chatham dairy farms, for example, in the Point Fortin constituency, showing what they are going to do there. The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries would have shown what is happening in Pointe-a-Pierre in those farms formerly controlled by Petrotrin.

Madam President: Sen. Obika, I have to caution you that you are going off track in your contribution. I need you to be relevant to the Motion, please.

Sen. T. Obika: So there is a burning question that Sen. Mark raises in the Motion and that has to do with regarding the availability of farmers to get leases. Where the Motion starts:

“Whereas the Government has, by virtue of a lease agreement, assigned interest in excess of one thousand acres to the owner of General Earth Movers Limited/Marilissa Farms...”

3.00 p.m.

The question that is raised there that is tied pertinently and relevantly to the questions raised by the farmers whose lands have been bulldozed, is how is it Marilissa Farms can get access to state lands, 1,000-plus acres, in a deal that was surprisingly, in a deal for a site where the person who expressed interest had a surprising best fit with the criteria for selection. The question is, why other farmers—the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries chose to confine his example of farmers getting lands in one particular locale. Why could the Minister not defend his record with lands in many other locales across the country? It again ties back to my opening salvo, that this Prime Minister and this Government's most vocal statement and policy on agriculture in this country is encapsulated by the Prime Minister's statement that Trinidad and Tobago does not have enough land, meaning they do not consider the endeavours of citizens.

The other issue raised in this Motion has to do with the interlocking interest, a question on the interlocking interest of General Movers and Marilissa Farms, when we turn to the second issue raised, where it is stated:

“Be it resolved that the Senate call on the Government to take steps to ensure that the rich aggregate on the said acreage of the leased lands is protected;”

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, as the Government's first

responder to the Motion failed to address this important aspect of the Motion, because—and why this is very important, this is a salient aspect, it is at the core of the Motion where the taxpayer is questioning the motives behind selection of a company directly connected by ownership to General Earth Movers who, in the public's eye, is not only a supporter, but a financier of this regime. This is public perception. The Government, through their first mover, has failed. They have failed to clarify, to ensure that there is in fact no issue, no real connection. That, however, can only be done by bringing forth the terms and conditions of the agreement with Marilissa Farms. Because if in the terms and conditions of the agreement it forbids them from engaging in any activity that affects the rich aggregate on the said acreage of land that makes it criminal or ultra vires the contract for them to so do, not just citing some law otherwise that may cover that, not just citing some other policy that may cover that, because we know in this country that we have a poor record in monitoring illegal quarrying and activities of such nature.

So the Government has failed to address that. I see the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, under whose purview quarrying and mines reside, taking notes, and I hope the people of Trinidad and Tobago will get some clarity by virtue of reading the aspects of the agreement, if not tabling it for the benefit of the Parliament, that covers the barring of Marilissa Farms, because if Marilissa Farms is allowed to quarry for aggregate on those lands, what it would amount to, Madam President, is the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago being taken for a ride because it would not be about farming when the chips fall where they may. This agreement would have nothing to do with farming. In the ultimate sense it would have to do with the gifting away the resources that is the birthright of each and every citizen

of this country via the taxpayer to one entity who is unknown in the public's view, a known friend and financier of this regime. Madam President, may I ask what time I should end, please?

Madam President: You end at 11 minutes past 3.00.

Sen. T. Obika: I thank you very much. Now, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries went on to speak in his defence of the Government's agenda that this is not an attack on small farmers. But how can the small farmers take solace in that statement? There are small farmers across this country involved whether they be in the form agricultural cooperatives, individual farmers, farming families, doing farming as a matter of posterity. How can they take solace in the words of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries when the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries could point to not a single other entity that is currently enjoying, by virtue of this Government's endeavours, enjoying similar arrangements as Marilissa Farms is now enjoying. The Minister could only point to something that is in the pipeline, so it really—the Minister's defence of this Government's actions is a non-defence. It in fact raises more questions than answers as to the integrity of the decision-making, the integrity of the process behind gifting these resources of our country.

Madam President: Sen. Obika, you have five more minutes.

Sen. T. Obika: I thank you, Madam President. Gifting these resources of our country to one entity, one entity who the people know are directly connected to this Government.

Madam President: Sen. Obika, as you wind down your contribution try not to be repeating. You seem to be repeating all that you have said before. So, yeah, try not to be so repetitive.

Sen. T. Obika: Madam President, there is another issue here at play. Trinidad and Tobago has a high food import bill. One would have expected the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to present substantial figures showing the actual output of the existing farm over the years and showing by virtue of the decision-making that led to gifting these lands to Marilissa Farms, the projected increase in output of the farm, in dollar value and in quantity in volume of items. No such data, no such information was presented.

So there is no one present in this Parliament who has become any richer after listening to the entire submission of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. Not a single individual. So therefore, no citizen of this country has benefited from the contribution of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. He has provided not a shred of data to support the decision to take the farm away from the State's control, except stating how much money he has spent on the farm by virtue of subvention from the State. But I want to say that even if you are involved in private agriculture, you still benefit from subsidy, so there are costs, it is all not benefits.

What was required today was a fulsome—and I am sure Sen. Dr. Lester Henry would agree with me as an economist; I am sure Sen. Amrita Deonarine will agree with me as an economist, that for anyone here to make proper contributions to this debate, for them to defend this Government's decision, the Government should have by right to the citizens of this country, presented statistics showing exactly what was the output of the farm that contributed to the food consumption of this country and what would be the output after Marilissa Farms has gotten the ball rolling. That was not done. It brings us back again to the Motion, that we want to resolve that the Senate call on the Government to take steps to ensure that

the rich aggregate on the said acreage of land is protected. So the Government has failed to answer that question. We are comforted to know, we are not sure if the statement was actually defunct, except by the words of the Minister. But we need data to prove that.

Then, I want to conclude, Madam President, by asking the question on behalf of all the farmers in this country, because in Point Fortin constituency I am working with some young farmers who would desire the benefit of state lands, who would desire to be able to move as fast as this Government would move in the issue of the Aripo farm, in the interest of Marilissa Farms. Can the Government show an equal strength and force of decision-making on behalf of all the farmers of this country and not just those farmers that are connected, or that farmer that is connected to this Government, this regime, as a financier and as a friend? I thank you, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President: The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan): Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, we are just shy of a couple months of spending five years in this Senate, and I always labelled Sen. Mark as the king of Motions, because he always has Motions on the adjournment, Private Members' Motions, but, Madam President, if I must use a pun, this is a Motion without any motion. It has fallen flat, because as Sen. Rambharat, Minister Rambharat rightly said, it lacks substance and it has significant ulterior motives.

But, Madam President, I am fed up of hearing Senators on the Opposition side coming in here and casting aspersions on people, businessmen and normal citizen alike and saying they are PNM businessmen, they are PNM this, they are PNM

that. Madam President, just for the records, there are just over one million registered voters in this country, 600 to 700,000 people cast their votes. They cast their votes for two parties. The PNM always gets more votes but, not significantly more. So you have a situation where over 300,000, close to 400,000 people vote for the PNM. Independent Senators, I do not want to bring them into the debate, they have a franchise, and you go to the polling station and you cast your vote. Obviously, you cast your vote because you have a political preference, but it does not make you a PNM Senator. The PNM Senators sit on this side. You are a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago who is demonstrating your franchise, and that is something fundamentally different to painting people with a brush and saying they are PNM supporters, they are PNM activists, they are PNM businessmen, and they are supporters of the party. So what? That does not deny you your right as citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, as a matter of fact, Sen. Mark fell so flat that Sen. Obika dealt with more substantive issues in the Motion than the mover himself. The food import bill, nobody spoke about that, because over this COVID period you saw a lot of statistics on the food import bill, and I am sure when Sen. Avinash Singh joins the debate later on he will speak on matters of these, this nature. But from my recollection some of the biggest expenditure on food import bill is the importation of beef, is the importation of dairy products, is the importation of sheep, mutton, and goat from Australia and New Zealand. We are fairly self-sufficient in poultry is my understanding, and we are a little better off in pork but we still import a lot of pork. So you should be complimenting the Government for initiating these agricultural projects so that we can reduce the food import bill. There is a role for small farmers but there is also a role for large farms. The countries that are most

successful in agriculture are based on large farms. In Australia, in the United States, in Russia, in Brazil, that is what gets your agricultural production up. So, I think the Government is on a right trajectory under the astute leadership of Sen. Rambharat as Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and ably assisted by Sen. Avinash Singh, under the distinguished leadership of the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

But, Madam President, let me read the Motion:

“*Whereas* the Government has, by virtue of a lease agreement, assigned interest in excess of one thousand acres to...Marilissa Farms...for the” — purpose—“of a livestock” —farm.

That is a “whereas”, eh.

“*Be it resolved* that the Senate call on the Government to take steps to ensure that the rich aggregate on the said acreage of leased lands is protected;”

Madam President, it is an agricultural lease that was given to Marilissa Farms. Nobody came here today and say, what if Marilissa Farms build condominiums on the farm, or if they go and put down a housing estate. They cannot do that, because it is an agricultural lease. And by the same token it is not a mining lease, and I will explain that with some great level of clarity. Madam President:

In the—“Legal Context of Mineral Ownership in Trinidad...” —it recognizes—“...the ownership of mineral rights in land is a separate interest that can be severed from the ownership of the surface rights.”

That is a fundamental aspect of land law.

“In this jurisdiction, the original...” —Crown—“...grants of title to land by the State included all the sub-surface land not expressly reserved by the State.”

So, lands that were conveyed as Crown Grants prior to 1902, it was conveyed with mineral rights and the surface rights.

“However,...all the grants of land made after the 30th day of January, 1902 the Crown (now the State) reserved unto itself the mineral rights in the lands granted to private land owners.”

So you have a situation in Trinidad here today where you can own the surface rights and do not own the mineral rights. For the lawyers here they would know, sometimes when you do a conveyance they say, you buy so much of, they described the acreage, and say, save and except the mineral rights. And you can own lands not knowing that you do not own the mineral rights. I have worked my entire career in the oil industry. I was in charge of granting petroleum licences, and a lot of people felt they own the mineral rights, not—only to find out much to their chagrin that they had purchased the land, only the surface right but the mineral rights remained with a lot of the large landowners in Trinidad, I would not want to call their names, but that land gentry that resides largely in Port of Spain. So you had people in the south-west peninsula, when Texaco, and Shell and BP came and found oil they felt that the oil was theirs, only to find out that the oil belonged to other people and all they had earned was the surface rights. So, that is a peculiarity of our law.

How state lands are issued? State lands are issued by the Commissioner of State Lands under the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. With reference to obtaining a licence to mine on state lands:

”For the purposes of the section 17(1) of the”—Minerals—“Act, a competitive bidding process shall commence...”

Madam President, it is the law of Trinidad and Tobago that to grant a state mining

licence for state lands in which the state owns the mineral rights, it must be advertised to the public through a newspaper ad with invitations to bid. The State cannot award a mining licence on a sole selective basis. That is the law, and if you check over the last couple years, we have been issuing mining licence on a competitive tender process, and that is the process that will apply. An invitation to bid shall specify the geographical location of the acreage of state lands, the period when which the bids are to be submitted, the form in which the bids are to be submitted, and any other consideration and details which the Minister may consider relevant.

So, Madam President, the Minerals Act is clear. So Marilissa Farms cannot have an agricultural lease in Aripo and just go and start to mine like that. They will be breaking the law and they will be breaking the terms and conditions of the lease, and I am sure under the terms and conditions of the lease the lease could be forfeited for illegal activity. Here are some of the documents and criteria that is needed to apply for a mineral licence. You need proof of title, title documents, lease, eight originals of a survey plan registered by the Director of Surveys, approved by the Director of Surveys, proof of ownership of mineral rights; if not, it belongs to the State. The company, you need to supply a certificate of incorporation, an organization structure for the mining operation, the most recent land and building taxes, articles of association, notice of directors, notice of secretary, notice of registered address, PAYE file number, Form C income tax regulation, NIS registration certificate and NIB tax clearance. Other regulatory approval for mining, a certificate of environmental clearance from the EMA, a final planning permission from Town and Country, and most importantly a water extraction licence from the Water and Sewerage Authority through the Water

Resources Agency.

So, Madam President, this is a very robust process. Nobody—there is illegal mining, and the police is working closely with the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries to control and possibly bring to an end the proliferation of illegal mining, especially in northeast Trinidad. But in a transaction like the Marilissa Farms on the Aripo project, I can give this House the assurance that there is absolutely no way that the owners of Marilissa Farms can get involved in mining of aggregate that may or may not exist in the subsurface of their lease. Sen. Rambharat spoke about mining. We have issued some mining licences recently. We go back to the EMBD fiasco. Under the United National Congress, EMBD was allowed to mine all the sand deposits in central Trinidad that were formerly Caroni lands. They made multimillionaires of people who they “subletted” to without a mining licence. It is this administration who came into office, stopped the illegal mining, and we have now regulated the industry and EMBD has now re-tendered these mining operations to contractors, and I think certain contractors had won, and the mining has started, and there was a time when there was a shortage of red sand. That shortage has been alleviated.

So, Madam President, we have nothing to hide. We have managed this economy well and we have managed it in all aspects of the economic landscape. We have managed it through prudent management of the energy, which is possibly, I do not say this boastfully, but which is at the pinnacle of economy. We have managed it through trade and industry, which is manufacturing—and consumer affairs; we have managed it through agriculture. No Government, I think, in the longest while, has done so much for agriculture as this present Dr. Rowley’s administration here in Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] We have

regularized land tenure, and you speak to the farmers every day and they will tell you the biggest challenge they face is tenure. Sen. Rambharat, Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries outlined what was happening in Carlsen Field. What has happened in—the farm down in the east there, what is its name again?

Madam President: Minister, you have five more minutes.

Sen. The Hon. F. Khan: Centeno. So we have regularized land tenure. We have initiated certain mega projects where we would like to see a quantum leap in the production of certain commodities. We have settled a lot of infrastructural issues with the small farmers. We are self-sufficient in vegetables; pineapple, cheap; watermelon, cheap; bodi, cheap; pumpkin, cheap; plantain, cheap. The vegetable stock in this country we are self-sufficient, and if we had a better packaging system we could have been even exporting some of these things. Go to PriceSmart today and you would see there is a whole suite of local products that is inching its way into these big chains. And I am proud of the farmers of Trinidad and Tobago.

We have a long way to go, because we are still short on the production of grain, in the production of animal husbandry, and certain other aspects in agriculture. But I think under the leadership of a farmer and under the astute guidance of our Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and the Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, I think agriculture is in good hands, not only until later this year, but for the next several years to come. I thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

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

Sen. Khadijah Ameen: Madam President, I join this debate having listened to the contribution of Sen. Wade Mark as he laid this Motion on this Private Members' Day. Madam President, the issue of a lease agreement, a signed interest in excess

of 1,000 acres to the owner of General Earth Movers Limited for the use of a livestock station, a known PNM financier, the two Members on the other bench who have spoken have not denied this, and question of the ties to the leader of this Government, it is very alarming to say the least.

The response of the both Ministers thus far, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries and the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, two gentlemen who have within their portfolio issues regarding the economy of this country. At a time post-COVID when feeding our nation, revitalizing our economy, and bringing our country back on track in terms of the economy is critical, not only to us in Trinidad and Tobago, but to almost every nation because of what this pandemic has done to the world.

3.30 p.m.

Madam President, I heard no denial from those on the other Bench of their party's affiliation to this company. I heard no—well, we saw no documents coming forward that they were willing to submit to the Parliament to indicate that General Earth Movers has within their record, their track record, excellent performance in agriculture, in animal husbandry; excellent enough to be assigned interest in excess of 1,000 acres of state lands, lands belonging to Trinidad and Tobago.

And, Madam President, this is happening while farmers who for decades have been farming in Trinidad and Tobago, whether it is agriculture or animal—rearing animals, and who have been clamouring for leases, for regularization of the lands that they have been on for decades, while this Government has rushed to give one of their financiers 1,000 acres. And the Minister stands up in Parliament and calls this frivolous. It tells me how they feel about the citizens of this country; it

tells me how they feel about agriculture; it tells me that they are willing to enrich themselves and their friends, and they do not care about what the citizens think when they are exposed. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam President, I am happy that this matter came to the Parliament and I want to thank Sen. Wade Mark for bringing this Motion, because this is an opportunity for not only farmers but the citizens at large to see the callous nature, to see how, the attitude of this Government when it comes to dismissing the rest of the population and having no care or regard for the fact that one of their financiers has been receiving comfortable interests belonging to the State.

Madam President, for 10 years I served as a local government councillor. My district included the area from Carapo to Bamboo and included St. Augustine south. Within that area it is—generally, it is within the Caroni River basin and in that area, you also have a lot of agriculture lands and a lot of farmers who live and plant in that area. There is not a big concentration of rearing of animals, it is mostly food crop. The Macoya wholesale market, which we petitioned and which was renamed, the Norris Deonarine Northern Wholesale Market under the former Government, also falls within that district. I offered myself as a local government representative to represent the interest of the people and because so many farmers, even though they did not vote in that area and so on, because they occupied lands there, that became part of my interest.

And so, Madam President, I want to share why I feel so strongly seeing this one entity get 1,000 acres while the farmers of Orange Grove, the farmers in Bamboo, in what was called Valsayn South, in Carapo, while they are decimated by flooding—well, sometimes it is one—

Madam President: Sen. Ameen, I have given you a little time to sort of finesse

your contribution. But I want you to just read the Motion that is before us today, eh, and try and make your arguments, but connect it to this Motion, please. Okay?

Sen. K. Ameen: Thank you, Madam President, I intend to do so. Madam President, maybe I took a little long to say why agriculture became so dear to me, having not been a farmer or a descendant of a farmer myself. But let me very quickly say that the issue of leases—in light of this lease for 1,000 acres being given to General Earth Movers and the fact that farmers in Orange Grove and so on, have been clamouring for leases, Madam President, the regularization of leases, the fact that many of our farmers are basically squatting on agriculture land because their tenure is not regularized, that adds to insecurity of food in our nation.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries spoke about some farmers and some of the activities that he feels his Government was instrumental in doing. Madam President, when the People's Partnership was in government, we created avenues for farmers not only to be able to bear crops better but also to get to market. And market does not mean the Tunapuna Market or the local market. It means processing, it means exporting.

Madam President, the processing, the issue of flooding, for example, the need for irrigation, the Minister spoke of—

Madam President: Sen. Ameen, Sen. Ameen—

Sen. K. Ameen: Yeah.

Madam President: This a very specific Motion and if you want to bring issues of flooding, you have to somehow tie it into the Motion, which you are not doing. You are standing and you are giving an all-encompassing contribution, and I need—on different issues but not on the issue of the Motion— I really need you to tie it in.

Sen. K. Ameen: All right. Okay, Madam President, I just want to respond to some things that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries indicated in his contribution. He spoke about what he calls development in some areas where there are parcels of land where food crop is planted. Madam President, drainage and irrigation is part of the development of farming lands. The Minister spoke about certain areas that the Government has undertaken some work.

Madam President, this is just a small percentage of what I am aware was happening before this Government came into office. When he speaks of these things, many of these things were happening before he came into office and in fact, there are many things that were happening that he has either no knowledge of or he has failed to continue. And I want to ask him today that the irrigation of lands, that the instillation of ponds—I am saying instillation but it is really to dig ponds in the areas—to provide pumps so that clean water could go to the farmers, because many of our rivers are in fact contaminated. I know that the Minister would be aware of many of these things. But in his response, Madam President, the impression I get is that he seems to believe that what he is doing—

Sen. Rambharat: 45(1), Madam President.

Madam President: 45(1)?

Sen. Rambharat: 45(1), Madam President. The Senator is making reference, in the course of her contribution, the Senator is making references to things attributed to me that were never said.

Madam President: Well, Sen. Ameen, how about you just listen to me for one second. There is a Motion, the Minister responded to the mover of the Motion and may have added some things and may have raised some issues. But at the end of the day, you can respond to the issues he has raised, but you have to get back to the

Motion in a relevant way. Okay?

Sen. K. Ameen: Thank you very much. Thank you. Madam President, I really wanted to mention how appalling it is for one company to be issued this huge amount of land and the issues on the other hand and to ask Trinidad and Tobago to weigh what is before us, the issues that are facing farmers and food crop farmers.

And, Madam President, I came—in fact, I seconded the Motion by Sen. Mark but I really was encouraged to join in this debate based on the response of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries. And I know that—I mean, part of the debate would be speaking directly on the words of the Motion, but it will also be responding to other persons participating.

Madam President, having regard to what you indicated to me a few seconds ago, I want to say to the Ministers who have responded thus far, I want to say to the Government on a whole, that you cannot keep abusing the Treasury and abusing the taxpayers' resources in this manner and not feel the repercussions. The Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries also has questions to answer on this because he is aware of what is going on. Sen. Wade Mark would have spelt out the fact that there is this large farm in Trinidad and a large farm in Tobago—

Sen. Singh: Madam President—

Sen. K. Ameen: And I hope he would join in the debate—

Sen. Singh:—46(6), she is speaking to the Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, could she clarify that?

Sen. K. Ameen:—and I hope that the Minister in the Ministry would join in this debate and clarify to the nation and if that cannot be done then there are other avenues to bring the truth to the public. I thank you very much, Madam President.

[*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Dr. Varma Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me to take part in this debate. And, Madam President, first I may say I heard Sen. Mark actually made some comments to the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries stating that people may not have been aware of this deal coming into place before. But to be fair to the Minister, there were press releases before where, I think there was an article, Madam President, where Radhica De Silva from the *Guardian* actually mentioned the fact, I think it was 2018, that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries did in fact mention that there needs to be more state/private investment. And you know, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries announced it was an ambitious plan to revamp the local livestock. So therefore, yes, we knew that since 2018, this was something on the table really that, you know, that at least came to fruition recently.

So, we have heard about companies bidding for it, we have seen the fact that the Minister did in fact state that there is the need to revamp the industry and there is definitely the need, Madam President, because you see, Trinidad and Tobago with our import bill, we can save a lot of money if we can have that industry back on track. Even recently, Jamaica, their agricultural society, and there is a company called Hi-Pro and they actually decided—remember they were undergoing some sort of economic—they are undergoing some sort of economic problems. But they revamped their market by actually having an industry where they are using the cheese and making cheese, goat milk, making skincare products, making soaps. And the whole idea about it is they have now gone off on a tangent where they are getting investments, they are actually getting new breeds of genetic lines, of exotic breeds to at least revamp their industry.

So I think, definitely, we need it in this hard economic times, anything you can use to save that foreign exchange is needed. The thing is, the Aripo farms that comes under discussion, at least serves a function and this is a question I wanted to ask. Besides being there for the livestock, they also are used to train our vets. So somehow we have to factor into account: Will this new entity, this private entity, be it private and state-owned, still maintain that function that our vets could go there and be trained? And this is something I am thinking that we have to see what could be done about it.

The goat industry in Trinidad and Tobago has been there. In south, the same company, as I was doing my research is really, has done tremendous work in the rearing of goat and livestock. So their track record is there. And in Trinidad, I remember, if we really have this industry going to the full extreme—remember, goat racing was first introduced to the world from Tobago. So Trinidad and Tobago is not only famous for Brian Lara and Penny Commissiong, Hasely Crawford, but being the first country in the world—and then there are other countries, Tanzania, you have Zimbabwe, even in the UK now there is a goat race, and it all started in Tobago in 1925. So this industry could also make food and it could also breed goats that could partake in any sort of competition worldwide. So we need these breeds of goat to come in and at least give us that extra incentive.

But, Madam President, I must say that when I looked at Sen. Mark's, you know, his debate for today, his idea of bringing this in, you know, three points that came to me. The fact that we have a state company which actually, as Sen. Mark said, it ran to the ground and it was allowed to be, in a way, rundown that, you know, we had no choice now to try and rescue it. And Sen. Mark pointed this out. But what I am saying, Madam President, I do not want to single out this company.

Trinidad and Tobago has failed all our state companies. You see, jumping into state and private enterprise, I think, is—we have no choice now.

Now, it is a pity though because when our first Prime Minister came, he had the knowledge that we would get rid of the outsiders, we would get rid of these private enterprises, capitalistic system, we will socialize, we will have state enterprise run by persons, and that was his dream. But right now—and I want to make a quote, Madam President:

There will come occasions when the State may have to take the initiative as an investor, without prejudice to the policy of encouraging and supporting private enterprise, in order to protect and promote national interest.

So we have come a full turn now where we are now unable, for somehow, to manage the state enterprises and it is not just this one. So I do not want to say this one I singled out, to give it to some financier. Our 52 state enterprises have all shown that it has been left in the hands of persons who—and successive governments have put those state enterprises in the hands of persons who may not have done the best for Trinidad and Tobago.

And if you would please allow me to quote, Madam President, an article in the *Newsday* by Edmund Narine. And this article, Madam, actually looked at the state enterprises. It actually look at the fact that when the United States Ambassador came here and his first speech he gave was actually criticizing state enterprises, not just in this country but in his country also, stating that they are not performing efficiently. And people were taken aback that here he came and that was his first speech. And this article actually serves to reflect on what he had said. So here you have an outsider telling us that our state companies are not working too well. And in this article, as I mentioned:

“...Ambassador Joseph Mondello”—came—“to tell us...that state enterprise investment is clearly not transparent...not market driven, and...not designed to benefit the people of the countries (receiving such investment).”

So, when I read this, I felt a little embarrassed that an outsider will have to come and tell us this. But this is a fact we knew, because we knew what was happening to our state enterprises. And this article by Edmund Narine actually mentioned the fact that if the Government abandons the state enterprise system, we will have to adopt a free market option. And we have to know who will benefit and who will lose.

Now, Sen. Mark did mention the fact that, I think there are 100 persons now employed at the Aripo farms. So we have to know what will happen to those jobs. Plus the fact is, if a private company comes in, will that private company now—definitely, there will be benefits. It will help, again, the livestock market, it will help with employment, so it may create that boost. But you see, what we have to guard against is what Sen. Mark was suggesting that it is a financier involved. Now, I do not know or quite honestly who financed which party and what, but what I do know, there should be a level of transparency in all land leases, in all activities. [*Desk thumping*]

And you see we would not have been here today if the whole procurement body had come into place, and we actually have it running, if we had brought the finance campaign Bill before us, before elections, I am thinking, we may not have need to come here and argue this because things would have been in place where people could have just look back and say, “Look, it went through the correct channels.” And you see there is always thought that if a financier gains from the

Government, will he channel that back into the party for election? There is always that allegation and we cannot be coming here week after week hearing these allegations, which could be very true, but what I am saying, we need to put the legislation in place. So just as how we did section 24, the Parliament in a weekend, I have no problem if we want to sit here and pass the procurement, put it in place and also, any sort of campaign financing. If we have to stay here a week and do it before elections, it something worth it for our country, for our people.

So, as I continue with Edmund Narine's article, he said:

“Petrotrin, the crown jewel of the state enterprise system, was closed on November 30 for reasons that affect most, if not all, of TT's state enterprises...”

And he said it is:

“...an overmanned, unproductive workforce resulting in inflated wage and benefit costs.”

So he is basically trying to criticize the system where he finds the workers were being paid too much—the excessive. But he also mentioned that in the—the fact is, when Trinidad got independent, he mentioned the fact that the idea of having the state enterprise was a good idea. But he said—you see, we have to appreciate what went wrong, because we have to appreciate that state enterprises could fail and have failed. And if you now have a state private-run institution, if it is too much influence of the State telling the persons who to hire, what to do, you find that same institution could fail, and right now, with our economic climate, we cannot afford for any investments to fail. Because the Government could give that investment to this venture and five years down the line, we could hear that we have to bail them out. And this, I think, is not fair to the taxpayers.

So reading Edmund Narine's article, he said:

"...Williams embarked on the state enterprise expedition. He purchased the bankrupt British West Indian Airways..."—

Madam President: Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh, I need you to tie in whatever it is you are making reference to, to the matter at hand a little faster. Okay?

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Sure. Thank you, Madam. I am trying to tie in that if we have this state/private, I am trying to say that we should not have too much of state influence, because he continued in his article:

"At its inception the state enterprise system..."—

Madam President: And you need, Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh, to say why that point is relevant to the Motion that is before us. You need to tie it in, please.

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Sure. I think it is relevant, Madam, in the sense that we cannot have too much of influence on the State. We have seen the state enterprises being manned by persons who have caused us to have disappointments in most of the failed state enterprises before. So what I am saying is, is there any way that, besides looking at Sen. Mark's—looking at the deal that went through, was it transparent, I am saying we also have to look at the factor that we cannot allow the State—we have to see what is the State's involvement in this in the terms that it cannot influence certain persons in this private—and our private-run institutions may have greater transparency, as I think Minister Rambharat had mentioned sometime in the past. So there would be a greater degree of transparency. But you see, if there is too much influence from the State, you could man it with persons that could run down this establishment. So we have to be a little careful about that and I am thinking that the whole idea, we are moving to a free market system, probably has to be a government policy to say, "Are we going to just get rid of

most of our state enterprises and now head into that direction private/state partnerships?”

Now, I have to be fair to the Minister, he did, as recently as, I think it was February of this year, he actually had distribution of leases given to farmers in different parts of the country. So we are seeing things being done. We have seen—I mean it is twice, I think, that he had given out letters—we have seen that. And remember land and land by itself could be issue where you are giving those people land tenure or you are giving them that ability now to say, “This land is mine for whatever period of time”, you find that lease could go a long way in letting those people have a greater degree of productivity. So, again, I want to congratulate him for that venture where those persons actually were given leases for—different farmers in different areas, I think it was Sangre Grande—different areas and this was something to be commended.

The other thing is we have to look though at the fact that the procurement of any sort of a lease, the transparency, would always come into talk, it will be debated, it is election, that will happen and I think both parties should now put something in place that there is less likelihood for this pointing fingers; less likelihood to say, “I am doing this.”

And I just wanted to say it from the Government of Canada website, Madam President, there are guidelines of proactive disclosure of contracts. And I am thinking we could probably learn from them, learn from them in the sense that they have as part of their contracts, where:

“As part of Canada’s second Action Plan on Open Government, the Government of Canada has committed to the disclosure of contracting data via a centralized, machine-readable database available to the public.”

So public disclosure of all contracts, of all leases, I think, should be there, we should follow the Canadian system since we are having pointing of fingers both ways. So the public could now look and say, “Hey, this was a contract that came, was it above board? Yes, we think so, we judge, we open it up for discussion.” And what I am saying is that that—so I am hoping that the powers that be, look at these guidelines from the Canadian system—

Madam President: Sen. Dr. Deyalsingh, you have five more minutes.

Sen. Dr. V. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam President—look at these guidelines and see if somehow we can bring it into our system. What I must say, Madam President, too, besides the fact that we are looking into the lease arrangement and trying to put things in place to ensure that there is more transparency, more accountability, and the fact that we are now probably moving away from just state enterprises to state private enterprises— very important, to put things in place for this.

And I am saying, lastly, Sen. Mark did raise a point that, is there going to be any sort of quarrying—the quarry operation in this field, we have to be clear on it. Because remember that land was a protected land before. So the livestock station was there and it can continue, right. We have no problem with that. But you see, if you are going to start mining, you may now be causing greater degradation to our environment. And that is a pristine land. Remember Charles Kingsley, the author, he visited in 1874 and he described the Aripo lands as a beautiful place, pristine lands, he wrote about it and we should now try to see if we can at least maintain that. Damages occurred already to the surrounding areas because we have had even during the COVID—reports came out that during the COVID, persons actually went and were digging big holes in Valencia, in different areas.

And I am saying, the illegal quarrying operation is something I think the Minister of—Mr. Franklin Khan in his Ministry, Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, may have to really look at this because the environment will take a toll on it, persons are being cautious about it. There are a lot of arrests going on. I am glad that there are a lot of arrests for the illegal quarrying and I am saying we probably need to know—this company is linked to a quarrying operation also—really speaking, if they are allowed to quarry there, I think we will have to get some sort of disclosure if that is so and probably rethink this because that piece of land, Aripo, is also a watershed, there is a lot of flora and fauna that needs to be protected. Thank you, Madam President.

4.00 p.m.

The Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. Avinash Singh): Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to contribute in this Motion today, and I want to start off by just responding to some of the comments made by my hon. colleague, Sen. Deyalsingh. Through you, Madam President, I just want to clarify that, Sen. Deyalsingh, it is not a hundred workers involved in the transition, but 18 workers, all of which have already been incorporated in aspects and sections within the Ministry already, and Minister Rambharat would have alluded to the consultations we had with the president of the trade union. So that was transitioned very, very smoothly.

Another comment, Madam President, made by Sen. Deyalsingh, I think there is probably a little bit of a mix up and confusion in the site we are speaking about. Because when someone hears the word “Aripo”, immediately they think about flora and fauna, and while that may be so, I just want to indicate that there is a vast difference between the Aripo Savannas and the Aripo Livestock Station.

The Aripo Savannas is an environmentally-sensitive area and that is where our rich heritage in flora and fauna lies.

Now, the Aripo Livestock Station, I will come to the details of that in terms of the acreage and what sections are already designated for, and what some parts are actually going to remain. But before I do so, Madam President, I just want to turn my attention to some of the comments made by Sen. Mark in the pilot of this Motion and, you know, I want to say here today that it is absolutely no secret that I am a farmer. I am a registered farmer even before my political life, during my political life, and it will be so after my political life. And that is to say, every time I sit here and some debate starts, I mean the way—the response from the Opposition is that they are severely opposed to people being farmers, and they are severely opposed to registered farmers, and significantly opposed to the Prime Minister being a registered farmer.

Madam President, I feel ashamed to sit here in this august Chamber, as a farmer by profession, and allow the Opposition to continue to use this Chamber to degrade my profession and my colleagues in the agricultural sector.

Sen. S. Hosein: Madam President—

Sen. A. Singh: Madam President, it is absurd—

Sen. S. Hosein: Madam President, I stand on Standing Order 46(6). This Member is imputing improper motives on the Opposition.

Madam President: Senator, continue.

Sen. A. Singh: Thank you, Madam President. And this is the reason. I have no problem with the good professions in society of your good self, a lawyer; my Minister, a lawyer, lawyers, doctors, policemen, firemen, but farmers, we put food on the tables of every single profession and it is time that the Opposition respect

that.

Madam President, Sen. Mark spoke to the Prime Minister's visit to the farms. Madam President, could you imagine the Prime Minister, being a farmer himself, taking the time to visit farms since coming into office, upon assuming that leadership role? If the Opposition Leader, when she was Prime Minister, did not want to visit farms, then I cannot say anything about that, but I have to sit here and listen to the fact that the Opposition is taking umbrage of the Prime Minister visiting farms. Madam President, in 2019, on that farm visit, I was there so I could speak with some level of factual nature in that visit, and we visited high quality seedlings. It is a small family business operation in Penal, in the constituency of the hon. Member for Siparia.

Madam President, we also visited—and we all hear the boastings of the Moruga Hill rice. On that same visit, we visited the Moruga Hill rice project in Moruga, and the name is synonymous because he has just received, from this administration, one of the grants from the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and that is Mr. Mark Forgenie and the Moruga Hill rice product. We also visited Nubian farm in Moruga and that is the Mr. Lindsay Gay, and we also visited Marilissa's Farms. I am saying this to say—and that was on one visit. The Prime Minister is, as Minister Rambharat said, personally involved in seeing that the agricultural sector is brought up to the 21st Century and given the respect that it deserves, and if the Opposition does see it that way, Madam President, I feel ashamed to continue being a farmer and to even have the thought that that is the administration wanting to come into office and form the next government.

Madam President, one thing I want to indicate is that this lease arrangement—Sen. Obika in his contribution indicated that nobody else, no entity,

enjoys what this company is enjoying. Not a single entity enjoys the benefit of what Marilissa Farms is enjoying. Madam President, from the utterances from Sen. Deyalsingh who indicated that he saw and he read leases being distributed by the hon. Minister, you know, I must say, if we actually really put every distribution, every lease, that we, the Government, would be engaged in, we would fill every single newspaper on a daily basis if we were to really do that, but we are not doing that. Almost on a weekly basis, small ceremonies, no fancy, lavish ceremony where taxpayers' funds are used for caterers, rental of facilities, and all of that. It is a simple process.

Farmers come into the headquarters of the Ministry, Minister Rambharat, or sometimes I am there, we are simply to just hand over these leases, these titles, these documents to these farmers who are waiting. And, Madam President, we have been doing exceptionally well, because when you go through the length and breadth of this country, you will realize the level of production taking place. Sen. Ameen spoke to Orange Grove, I want to ask Sen. Ameen when was the last time she ventured into Orange Grove—

Sen. Ameen: Last month.

Sen. A. Singh:—and actually saw the production, the irrigation systems spent by this administration. Millions of dollars have gone into the irrigation infrastructure in Orange Grove and I dare say, under the last administration, not a single lease was executed to a single farmer in Orange Grove. Not one! Zero!

So, Madam President, when they come here and they talk about knowing, and seeing, and what is going on where leases are concerned, you know what they did? During the Caroni lease distribution process, I dare say, some Caroni tenants actually have two and three photocopies of the same lease and that was multiplied,

and that is what they used as their database to say well, they have distributed thousands of leases. We now have to call back these persons and fix those leases, Madam President. That is the record of the United National Congress when they are in office dealing with land tenure and leases because this Motion directly speaks to leases.

Madam President, the issue we are here today came about and—you know the question must be asked: Why are we here? Sen. Mark has, you know, a very colourful imagination to bring a Motion like this so comical in nature for us to waste time to debate here today with no facts, absolutely no information. If I were to ask Sen. Mark where can yellow-chest bullfinch be found in Trinidad and Tobago, could he answer that?

Sen. Ameen: What that have to do with Motion?

Sen. A. Singh: Madam President. Aripo Livestock Station, in the whole of the region, is home to the yellow-chest bullfinch. Nowhere else could you find that but in the Aripo Livestock Station.

Minister Rambharat spoke to Asa Wright and, Madam President, the fact of the matter is that no research was done. In fact, I want to invite Sen. Mark and the entire Opposition to accompany the Minister and myself to visit this facility whenever at their convenience. Maybe when they go into Opposition in the coming months, we can probably take them across and see the level of productivity going on there.

Madam President, in coming to this conclusion of putting a public/private venture in place, we did not just wake up one morning and do it by “vaps”. What this initiative was based on is scientific analysis of the sector and more so, on a daily basis, we have farmers, livestock producers, processors, entrepreneurs,

everybody complaining, complaining either to my office, to the Minister's office, to the Permanent Secretary, to all the county offices, on goods and services issued by the Ministry's departments. And what this caused the hon. Minister to do, is to initiate an audit, apart from the review—and, Madam President, I am not sure if you could recall but on our first budget presentation, Minister Rambharat indicated that he has looked at the livestock sector and we are going to put forward a review and let the scientific evidence and detail guide our investment opportunities and our decisions at the Ministry, and that is exactly why we are here and we have reached this point.

As I have mentioned, the audit, which was conducted by the Ministry of Finance, Investments Division, Madam President, what we saw and what we found—so, it is quite funny to me, who is somebody actively engaged in the agricultural sector, to believe a single word coming from the Opposition today that we allowed the Aripo Livestock Station to run down. Madam President, a facility of that nature cannot be run down in four years. There have been significant complaints, and the audit report speaks to some of this and I will just go through a few.

In just running through the report and the findings of that summary, Madam President, there were no standard operating procedures, there were inadequate systems used for recording and accounting, there were poor management and resources, there was inadequate maintenance, and this is an audit speaking directly to veterinary services by the Ministry. So we have in our system, Madam President—Sen. Deyalsingh spoke to: What about the vets who will have to train and all of that? But this is an audit, Madam President, telling us that most of the vets' time was spent on research and development at this facility.

At the end of the day, Madam President, we want to ensure—when you go through the report, there was a shortage of veterinary offices at the counties, several issues were noted regarding field services, there was no up to date database of livestock farmers, Madam President, littered with complaints, and it dealt with this facility. So we are here, the taxpayers of this country, funding a facility owned by the State, managed by the State. And when you speak to the farmers about what do you want in the livestock sector, as simply—Sen. Deyalsingh had it head on, genetic material. New genetic material, new livestock, new breeds, good yielding varieties of animals, whether it be for milk or meat production.

We are not taking away any of that from the population. The benefits to the population—I will just go into a few from this arrangement, but I dare say, while we have veterinary services offered by the Ministry, I think—and this is common sense—these vets are really needed out there assisting and ably giving advice and technical advice to the private sector, the private farmers, the people like Shiraz Khan, the people like all the farmers—the Khans—all of these farmers who require the technical support. Artificial insemination advice, embryo transfer, all of these things are required to bring the livestock sector into the 21st Century and actually deal with that food import bill that Minister Franklin Khan spoke about, because when you drill down in the food import bill, Madam President, you will see a significant portion of that import bill is actually cheese.

I was shocked to know that we actually import more cheese than wheat for flour, and the value is over \$300 million per annual in just cheese. Milk, dairy, meat products, meat by-products, we import. And Sen. Khan was right, we as a Government are doing everything in our authority and our power to bring Trinidad and Tobago to a state where we can be self-sufficient. We are certainly self-

sufficient in the poultry sector, somewhat into the vegetable sector and I am certain that the livestock sector, with initiatives like these, will definitely bring value.

Madam President, let me just turn to some of the benefits because we spent some time into the lease arrangements and all of that. It is not going to be free—

Madam President: Senator, you have five more minutes.

Sen. A. Singh: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, most persons who have a lease, have an obligation to the State. There is always conveyance of a lease, what you could do, what you cannot do. And Sen. Khan was right, you cannot just take an agricultural parcel of land and decide that you are going and mine on it, and this is a site that anybody passes, everybody sees, everybody would know what is going on. So in the event that anybody decides to go and mine, Madam President, the authorities will take action, but let me look to some of the positives of this initiative and this project to ease the minds of the population as to what to expect.

Madam President, we heard about the 18 employees already being deployed in the different arms of the Ministry but what this programme is going to do is to create significant employment. Anybody in the agriculture sector—and I can tell you personally, you require a labour. And this initiative is going to create jobs servicing the sector from farm labour to value added processors. Madam President, this project is going to assist satellite farmers who are facing constraints that limit production and productivity by improving their enterprises through access through the value chain being considered. It will also create accessibility on a continuous supply of local products to manufacturers, retailers.

Madam President, what about the persons in the downstream? People making dahi, yogurt, as we want to call it, cheese, all these bakery items that

require dairy. It would be so nice to know that everything and most of the components would be coming from right here locally. A significant aspect of this initiative, Madam President, research and development, something that the Ministry has been doing and the farmers have complained in the past that we need to step up. And with some level of private sector involvement, this facility now will be partnering with different arms of state, and foreign universities, and foreign players bringing that—where Marilissa will be paying for that.

So it will assist researchers by having a more direct involvement and continuous hands-on research improvement, local, regional and international, for livestock production. It will also improve large ruminant farmers' access to training, information, breeding stock, and forage. This facility has also partnered with UTT, and the students are going to have access to this facility for research and development. How many times we hear about underemployment, students graduating and not going and doing what they are trained or what they are experienced to do? But we are saying here, at UTT, our students could now find a home to practise what they are taught.

Food security, Sen. Khan spent some time on that. Agrotourism, the same yellow-chest bullfinch that I invite Sen. Mark to join me in going and seeing, will be a part of what this facility will be keeping. Agrotourism—regional hub for livestock technology, high quality genetics in different formats. For example, live animal, embryo transfer, semen, and so on, artificial insemination. Madam President, the industry will be developed because it will contribute to the mandate of the revitalization of large ruminant sector in the Ministry linking farm to table. The buffalypso, a prized possession, and it was associated with our watchwords, “Discipline, Tolerance and Production”, we want to see that come back into the

mainstream because the cheese from that, Madam President, mozzarella cheese, all the fancy cheese is from buffalo.

The point about this matter, Madam President, and I could spend so much time going into the benefits of an initiative like this, and I am saying that we need to understand that this country is dying for investment in agriculture and we need the players to come on board so that we will move into the 21st Century and thereby providing food for our population. Again, Madam President, I do not know what the issue is of PNM farmers, but I am a PNM farmer and when I grow food, I did not stamp it or brand it UNC or PNM to consume. So, Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity and I conclude. [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, let me thank all of my Senatorial colleagues for intervening and contributing to this very important matter. I think it was Sen. Deyalsingh who made the point that had we had full proclamation and operationalization of the Public Procurement and Public Disposal of Property Act in full flight then maybe I would not have had to raise this matter here today.

I have listened very attentively to the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land Fisheries, and the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, my good friend, felt that I ought to have addressed some of the issues I have dealt with today on behalf of the Opposition, UNC, by raising the relevant issues through several mechanisms, namely reference is made to an application to the FOIA, maybe I could have raised the matter under the JSC on Land and Infrastructure, or maybe even file questions. But, Madam President, the Government signed off on this deal or this arrangement over the last, let us say year, or 15 to 16 months, and the Government, through the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, never found

it necessary to bring to this Parliament the necessary documentation including the lease agreement for public viewing.

I was forced to bring a Private Members' Motion in order to draw this to your attention, hon. President, and to the attention of my colleagues. When the Government, if they have nothing to hide, ought to have been able, Madam President, to table those documents here, to table the lease agreement—they call it agricultural lease agreement. But the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries spoke, we have listened to the Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, and not a single Member indicated to this Senate that they will provide to this Parliament a copy of the lease. I listened, I waited to hear from the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries when he is going to lay onto the table—that is the hon. Minister—a copy of that lease so that all of us, Madam President, would be able to have access to the terms and conditions of this lease.

If the Government has nothing to hide, if there is no secrecy, why is the Government afraid, Madam President, to table the terms and conditions of the agricultural lease for public consumption?

Sen. Rambharat: Madam President, if my colleague could give way to deal with this at particular point? Madam President, I was very clear in my contribution that the agreement reached with Marilissa, it is contained in an MOU. I was very clear in saying that. There is no lease agreement to lay. Lease agreement in transactions like this will follow. For example, for the purpose of creating the lease, a site has to be resurveyed. I raised the issue of the Immigration Detention Centre; that land has to be excised. There are squatters on the area, residential squatters, that has to

be excised. So there is a process to be followed, and at this stage, there is an MOU that governs the arrangement.

Sen. W. Mark: Well, Ma'am, I will ask the hon. Minister, based on what has said, that he makes available to this honourable Senate copies of the MOU so that Members of this honourable Senate would have an understanding of what this MOU entails. This, Madam President, is needed for transparency and accountability.

Madam President, as was stated in the debate, the Minister should have given us a status report because the Marilissa Farms has now taken charge of the Aripo Livestock Station. There are live bodies, warm bodies on the property. They are conducting and rearing cattle and other ruminants. I do not know if goat and sheep would be part of it. My research revealed a hundred employees thus far and it could go up to a thousand. I did not get from the hon. Minister, through his contribution, what is the status of this farm, this Aripo livestock farm or station. Madam President, I also raised in my presentation the milk pasteurized unit or the pasteurized milk unit, whatever it is called, which attracted some \$15 million to \$17 million under the Partnership Government, and what will become of that particular unit. The Minister, for some strange reason, refrained or did not consider sharing with us what this or what will become of this pasteurized unit on the farm or at the Aripo Livestock Station.

Let me make it very clear to the Parliamentary Secretary, Sen. Avinash Singh, that no one has any objection to the Prime Minister, your good self as Parliamentary Secretary, the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries going on any tours in this country to visit farmers. Who can object to that? If the Government is interested and is being led

by the hon. Prime Minister in this agricultural thrust, Madam President, and they are committed to a revolution in agriculture, then I would have expected the Parliamentary Secretary, the hon. Prime Minister, the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government—my good friend—as well as the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries to speak out against the invasion and bulldozing of agricultural lands in Wallerfield, but I heard nothing from these very distinguished citizens of our country. So what is this thing about?

So, Madam President, sometimes you are forced to ask questions because you do not have the answers, and therefore, you need to put questions. These visits that we referred to, were they self-driven? In other words, was there a self-interest in this matter, or was it something broad, Madam President, in the national interest as it relates to agriculture and the farming community, and transformation of that sector? I am not too sure.

4.30 p.m.

When I was doing my research on this matter of the Marilissa Farms and goat and sheep, and so on, and I looked at what was going on on the sister isle, information came to my attention that there was a link between that farm in Tobago and the Sandals project. I do not know. I would have liked somebody and so on to clear the air for me on that.

So I think that I have raised an issue whether the Government decides to come clean and provide the information that I have requested. The Minister has indicated a short while ago that a formal lease agreement has not been concluded because of certain encumbrances that he outlined a short while ago but what we have in its place, as we speak, is in fact, Madam President, a memorandum of understanding or agreement and therefore, I would like the Government to deal

with this matter by tabling that document so that we can have an appreciation. Now, Madam President, when you realize that a farm or a livestock station the size of the Aripo Livestock Station is being given to an individual who himself is a farmer and we do not have the relevant information and documentation before us, then you leave room for speculation and that is why we are demanding that the Government lay on the table of this honourable Senate today, a copy of this memorandum of agreement so we can all have access to that agreement.

Madam President, when I looked at this matter of the farm and the Marilissa Farms, anything that is designed to bring about a revolution and a change in our fortunes when it comes to agricultural output so that we can enhance food security in our country for our citizens, you can count me in because food security is very critical for Trinidad and Tobago. And we have seen that given what has taken place with the farm at Marilissa, that this particular owner has been able to provide meat to the local market.

And I saw in a document “Spotlight on our Food Producers”, it is a *GreenVine* monthly bulletin and it is dated quite in January of 2010 and this particular publication highlighted the actual Marilissa Farms and when we—we are talking about in 2010 eh, Madam President, and at that time, that particular farm had already over 3,500 sheep and 600 goats. So you are talking about in 2010, you had over 4,000 heads of sheep and goats by this particular company or body called the Marilissa Farms. So we are now in 2020, so obviously that farm has expanded and hence the reason they have now gone to greater heights in the Aripo Heights and they have now taken charge of the Aripo Livestock Station with the view, of course, to expanding their operations and making available more meat to Hi Lo because we saw in this document that I am quoting from that their market or the

two main outlets for the meat that is slaughtered, Hi Lo Food Stores, one of them that supply meat to the market.

I would have liked to hear from the hon. Minister what percentage of the local market is currently controlled by both the Marilissa Farms, as well as the Lato Estate which is the farm that the 6,000 or 5,000 heads of goat and sheep now under the control of our local farmer who happens to be our Prime Minister. I would like to know where we are with the supply and what percentage of the local market that is being taken care of by these two powerful suppliers of meat. But we do not have that information with us today and that is why, Madam President, we brought this Motion so that we can get more information so that the population would be more aware of what is happening in our country.

I was quite happy to hear the Parliamentary Secretary intervene with such passion on this matter and you know, gave the impression that we in the UNC are against farmers. And I mean to say I have never heard such nonsense and literal rubbish that—sorry, Madam President, let me withdraw rubbish. But I have never heard such nonsense coming from the lips of a Parliamentary Secretary. We are committed to agriculture but we have a responsibility, Madam President, if there is an absence of transparency and accountability when dealing with the people's assets. We have a duty not to be blindfolded. Not everything that the PNM does, you simply have to accept. We do not belong to Balisier House, we belong to the house of the rising sun. “Yuh understand?” And in that mansion, there are many places for anybody on the opposition Benches if they want to join us. But do not give the impression that when we raise issues that is in the interest of Trinidad and Tobago, in the interest of transparency, in the interest of accountability, in the interest of openness, we do not like you as a farmer. How did the Parliamentary

Secretary arrive at that conclusion that we do not like him as a farmer, that is hon. Senator, or we do not like the Prime Minister as a farmer? How could you arrive at that?

What we demand, Madam President, is accountability, what we demand is transparency and what we demand is probity. That is what we demand and we are saying that no one, including the Prime Minister or Lincoln Thackorie must use the assets of the State without proper transparency and accountability. That is all that we are demanding. What is wrong with that? What is wrong with that, Madam President? Nothing is wrong with that. It is only those who have cocoa in the sun and they are expecting rain would object to that but let us be serious. Let us be serious.

So, Madam President, as I said in my earlier contribution, many of our colleagues in the Government seem to be in the wrong profession. They really should be business people. That is what they should be, not politicians and Ministers running government. When you join a government and you are a Minister of a government, your first and only responsibility is promoting the interest and well-being of the citizens of this Republic. Cannot be self-interest, cannot be. Madam President, how can I support that? You know why I have remained humble and poor for 29 years? Because when I joined this politics, my only interest is to serve the people, serve the people. [*Desk thumping*] So that is me. I stand for transparency, democracy, justice, accountability and I will not allow anybody on the Government Benches—

Madam President: Sen. Mark—

Sen. W. Mark: Madam President—

Madam President: I need you, I really need you to get to the Motion.

Sen. W. Mark: I understand, Madam President. Madam President, you know we were Pointe-a-Pierre colleagues together so I understand. [*Crosstalk*] No, I am not speaking to you, Ma'am, I am speaking to the hon. President.

Yes, so, Madam President, if I may continue, I would like to say that we have raised this matter, brought it to your attention and I would want to say, in closing, what we are demanding.

We are demanding that the Government do the following in closing. The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries has given an undertaking that given what obtains in the energy and mining industry, there is no possibility of rich aggregate lands located at the Aripo Heights and on the Aripo Livestock Station can ever be utilized by Lincoln Thackorie of Marilissa Farms and General Earth Movers Limited for purposes of construction. So limestone, bluestone will not be extracted from those acreages for purposes of road construction. That is the undertaking we got from the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, and the Parliamentary Secretary. So we know there is an undertaking that they have given to this honourable Parliament and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

And, Madam President, the second undertaking I extracted from this debate and I hope that the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries can rise and clear the air on this before I take my seat. Can you give this honourable House, through our distinguished President, the undertaking that you will table in this honourable Senate a copy of the memorandum of agreement so that every Senator and the citizens, through this Senate and through the media, would be able to have access to that document so that we can understand what this agreement entails? I would like to take my seat temporarily, give you an opportunity to rise to give that undertaking so that I can conclude my contribution. I give way to the hon.

Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

Sen. Rambharat: Madam President, with the greatest of respect to Sen Mark, he has put a Motion before us. In my contribution earlier, I outlined, particularly, I mentioned the freedom of information and I was very clear that I did not expect a Member of Parliament to go that way. But I outlined the avenue for Sen. Mark to have the broadest possible public discussion on this or any matter relating to state land. In fact, that committee has rendered reports and I myself have responded diligently to everything that has been asked of me as Minister by that committee.

So, Madam President, the Government wishes to deal with the Motion that is before us. I have answered the issue raised by the Motion which is a lease and the Government is quite prepared to deal with the Motion that has been placed before us.

Sen. W. Mark: Well, Madam President, the answer is no. All that talk is no that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago is not prepared to provide a copy of the memorandum of agreement entered into between parties. That is what I take from what the Minister is saying. Because, Madam President, anybody including myself can move an amendment to the Motion. I could simply move an amendment to the Motion, with your leave, to delete that portion that talks about lease agreement and put in its place memorandum of agreement as outlined by the Minister. But I sought to just get his undertaking, through your good self, that the Government is prepared to make that document available to us and apparently the Minister has declined to do so. So we will have to do what we have to do.

Madam President, can you tell me if I have two more minutes?

Madam President: You have three minutes again.

Sen. W. Mark: Yeah. So, Madam President, in closing, I brought, as I said, this

Motion to get answers. I think Trinidad and Tobago is a little richer, the country is a little richer today on this Marilissa Farms, the role of the Government in this whole matter, the relationship that I sought to clarify and to get answers to and I have not gotten answers to these questions so they remain up in the air. I wanted to get answers to the relationship, if there is any, between the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and the owner and managing director of Marilissa Farms. Is there a link between the sheep farm in Tobago and the sheep farm and goat farm in Penal? These are matters I wanted to clarify and get clear answers on because the country would like to know but we have not been able to get it, those answers, so speculation will continue, research will be continued and therefore, during the election, maybe the information would become quite clear to the population as we continue our research.

Madam President, I want to thank you for the opportunity for allowing me to move this particular Motion and I therefore beg to move.

Question put.

Sen. Mark: Can I have a division on this one for the purpose of—[*Inaudible*]?

The Senate divided: Ayes 5 Noes 14

AYES

Mark, W.

Haynes, Ms. A.

Ameen, Ms. K.

Hosein, S.

Obika, T.

NOES

Khan, Hon. F.

Marilissa Farms Limited/General Earth
Movers Limited
Sen. Mark (cont'd)

2020.06.23

Gopee-Scoon, Hon. P.

Baptiste-Primus, Hon. J.

Rambharat, Hon. C.

Moses, Hon. D.

Hosein, Hon. K.

West, Hon. A.

Cox, Hon. D.

De Freitas, N.

Singh, A.

Lester, Dr. H.

Dookie, D.

Williams, J.

Sinanan, R.

The following Senators abstained: Mr. P. Richards, Ms. S. Chote SC, Mr. A. Vieira, Dr. V. Deyalsingh, Ms. A. Deonarine, Mr. D. Teemal, Mrs. H. Thompson-Ahye.

Motion negatived.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklyn Khan): Thank you very much, Madam President. I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Monday, June 29, 2020 at 10.00 a.m. During that sitting, we will be carrying through all its stages the Miscellaneous Amendments (No. 2) Bill.

Madam President: Hon. Senators, before I put the question on the adjournment, leave has been granted for two matters to be raised. Sen. Mark.

**Entry Exemption into the Republic of T&T
(Government's Policy)**

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. I have raised the first Motion addressing the guidelines and/or criteria utilized by the Government to exempt persons from or to allow exemptions for entry into the Republic of T&T and this comes against the background of the recent entry into T&T by this country's permanent representative to the United Nations. I think that the time has come for the Government to clearly provide documentation to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and to the Parliament as it concerns the guidelines that they are using during the lockdown period. It seems as if the Government is making it up as they go along. I have never seen a document outlining the Government's policy on guidelines and the appropriate criteria for entry into this country.

Madam President, we have seen in the past where students, whether they were in Barbados, Jamaica or in even Cuba have been seeking to come in. Some of them have since returned but many of them are still stranded in countries. I think many of them are still in Cuba as we speak. And we do not have a clue as to the guidelines that are being used to deny citizens' entry into the country of their birth. Indeed, it appears that there is almost a number of different guidelines when coming to having people arrive here who are abroad.

In the particular instance that I refer to, and I have nothing against the Ambassador to the United Nations, our permanent representative Ambassador Penelope Beckles. I know of her a long time so I have no problem with the Ambassador. That is not the issue. What I raise this evening, Madam President, is that the PRUN—I call that the permanent representative for the United Nations in the abbreviated form—was allowed to come into this country and the question that

has to be asked, if you are coming into the country as an Ambassador, are you coming to discuss ambassadorial business? Are you coming to discuss foreign policy matters? Are you coming to discuss matters relevant or related to the Mission that you head at the United Nations?

But, Madam President, if there are no guidelines available for ambassadors or high commissioners, how are we to come to the conclusion that this thing was not manipulated in order to suit a particular purpose or objective? The question here: Why was "the Ambassador" granted permission and exemption to come in, and was the discussions surrounding her entry, as I said, matters, relating to the mission business in New York or foreign policy matters? In any event, if it was what I just said, that could have been done virtually through Zoom as we are doing in JSC meetings today. You could have had a meeting "Zoom-ing". However, that was not the case.

The Ambassador returned to our country, was placed in quarantine and it was during that quarantine period, another factor came into the brew, into the mix. During quarantine, the Ambassador was screened as a candidate for the Arima constituency. So you are in quarantine and you are screened. So the question here is: Is the Government taking the citizens of this country for a ride? Is the Government manipulating the guidelines that they alone know what they are, Madam President, to pick and choose who must come in and who must not come in and when they must come in? This is a very disturbing development.

So on the one hand, there appears to be contradictions. The Ambassador comes, the Minister of National Security tells us because the person is an ambassador. The person comes in, is quarantined, the person comes in and is also screened for a seat, and successfully at that. So what was the real purpose of

granting entry? Was it to facilitate screening or was it to deal with foreign relations matter or matters pertinent to the Mission in New York? Madam President, what is even more important for us to get clarified from the Government today is who paid for the arrival of the Ambassador to Trinidad and Tobago who came in here for screening?

Did not come in here, Madam President, from what we have seen so far, for any discussions on foreign policy or matters of the mission. The singular purpose that we have discerned thus far, unless we are told otherwise, is for screening purposes. So that was a political objective of the entry granted to the Ambassador to come into Trinidad and Tobago.

5.00 p.m.

Madam President, as an Ambassador if you are posted aboard and you are coming back to discuss foreign policy matters, you must be financed by the taxpayers of the country. So your ticket will be paid by taxpayers. But if you are coming, Madam President, to be screened as a candidate using the cover of ambassadorial status, the question that has to be asked, Madam President: Who is paying for that? That is the question that we are seeking to get from the Government and through that, Madam President, we want to get the policy behind these matters. Because, Madam President, these matters that I am raising could have been discussed. [*Interruption*] Yes, Madam President. These matters could have been discussed through virtual communication and interaction.

So, Madam President, in closing if the Ambassador came in here at our expense for screening, it represents an abuse of office. And therefore I call on the Government to clear the air on this matter this evening. Madam President, I thank you for giving me the opportunity to clear the air and raise this issue so I can get

clearance.

The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat): Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, the Motion asked for the Government to explain the guidelines/criteria used to facilitate the exemption for entry into the country by the country's permanent representative to the United Nations. Madam President, I want to assure Sen. Mark and the country that the guidelines and criteria used to facilitate the exemption to the Ambassador is the same criteria and guidelines used to facilitate the exemption to Member of Parliament for Princes Town, Barry Padarath.

Madam President, I do not know if Sen. Mark missed the reports in the media, but if I may refresh his memory, 16th of June 2019, Loop TT, under the headline:

“Barry Padarath granted exemption to return home for screening”—reports that:

“Princes Town MP Barry Padarath has been granted an exemption to return to Trinidad and Tobago to be screened by the United National Congress...

Padarath, who is currently in Florida, left the country in March before the closure of Trinidad and Tobago's borders.”

Later in the article it says:

“On Tuesday, National Security Minister Stuart Young confirmed to *Loop News* that the Princes Town MP was given the green light to return home.”

Madam President, the same criteria and guidelines used for the permanent representative was also used for Member of Parliament for Princes Town and we ought to have no complaint about that.

Madam President, the Ambassador has returned. The Ambassador returned

to Trinidad and Tobago on her own strength, with no assistance from the State and moved into quarantine in accordance with the existing protocols. To complete the explanation, Madam President, in relation to the Member of Parliament for Princes Town, I can only rely on a report by Gail Alexander, a report dated, Madam President, June 19, 2020, report by Gail Alexander and the headline reads:

“Cops want to quiz Padarath on his return home”

And in that article, Madam President, Gail Alexander is referring to Mr. Padarath saying that:

“...he's working this weekend on finalizing preliminary exemption approval which he received from Government and hopes to return perhaps next week or in the coming weeks.”

So Madam President, the exemption has been granted to both parties. One has returned on her own strength and has gone into quarantine and the other one is finalizing and hoping to come in the coming weeks, in accordance with the same guidelines and criteria and there is nothing to complain about. I thank you very much.

Madam President: Sen. Mark, next matter.

National Lotteries Control Board
(Government's Plans)

Sen. Wade Mark: Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, it is being speculated by the public that it is the intention of this outgoing Rowley-led Government to change the corporate ownership structure of the National Lotteries Control Board. Madam President, as you are aware, the National Lotteries Control Board is currently a statutory authority regulated by the Financial Regulations and with staff controlled by the Statutory Authorities Service Commission. However,

information has reached us that the Government plans to turn the organization into a state-owned enterprise.

Madam President, you know there has been a lot of what you can call “kangkalang” taking place at that National Lotteries Control Board; misappropriation, misspending, corruption at that board. So that board is riddled with all kinds of challenges and difficulties.

We understand that the Government, embarrassed by what is taking place, rather than clean up the mess, they want to put a Band-Aid on the mess by changing the structure, we are advised, from a statutory authority to a state-owned enterprise. We understand, Madam President, that the corporate status has been addressed by a legal opinion being rendered by a very well-known attorney, whose name I have, but I shall not reveal.

We have also learnt that a draft note, it should become a full-blown note, moving from draft to a final submission, may have taken place already, may have been submitted to the Cabinet already, and a decision may have already been taken. We do not know, Madam President, if this has to do with the recent victory by the former director called Camille Forde who was suspended in 2016, upon the arrival of the PNM, following an audit. She recently won a legal challenge in the court and, therefore, she is favoured to return to head the organization, if she has not gone back already.

So, Madam President, with the kind of speculation raging in the society surrounding this matter, we have, for instance, you know the National Lotteries Board deals with Lotto and Play Whe and we know that there is a firm contracted called International Game Technology, formerly GTech, which is attached to that particular organization or board, Madam President, and there are some challenges in this arrangement between NLCB and what is called IGT, since the legal advice

proffered that this agreement was not properly worded. So there appears to be some challenges emerging. And it is being proposed that if there is no agreement, the NLCB can seek a new provider, Madam President.

Madam President, you know the NLCB employees are extremely concerned about this planned privatization and the implications of same for their jobs. There have been no discussions held with the Public Services Association, which is the recognized majority union for those workers at the National Lotteries Control Board level.

So, Madam President, the questions that I would like to close by posing and asking to the Government are the following: Has the audit requested by the Prime Minister in 2016 into donations and sponsorship been completed? If so, can we know what the findings are? And can that audit be tabled in the Parliament?

I would like to also ask the hon. Minister who is responding: Has the National Lotteries Control Board submitted or caused to be submitted plans to transform the NLCB into a state-owned enterprise away from its current status of a statutory authority or body? I would like the hon. Minister to indicate what was the rationale for such a development? I would like also, Madam President, to get what was the role of the firm Bosch Global in this entire process? And what was the fee paid for the service of this said firm called Bosch Global. I am also asking, through you, hon. President, to the Minister: Has the Public Services Association been consulted on any aspects of the process regarding how staff would be affected by any such decision, as it relates to privatization?

And finally, Madam President, how would this transformation affect the current relationship between the IGT and the National Lotteries Control Board, as it relates to their existing agreement?

So, Madam President, I have raised this matter in the interest of the public to

get clarification from the Government as to the future status of the National Lotteries Control Board; whether it will remain a statutory authority, or whether the Government has taken a decision to transform it into a state-owned enterprise. I wish to thank you, Madam President, for giving me this opportunity.

The Minister of Public Administration and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Allyson West): Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, it may have slipped some of us but Sen. Mark's Motion was the need for Government to explain the reasons for the decision to change the status of the NLCB from a statutory authority to a state-owned enterprise. Once again, Madam President, Sen. Mark has brought a Motion before this House based completely on fiction. Not only has the Government made no such decision, but this issue has not been brought before us for discussion.

The National Lotteries Control Board continues to operate as it always has, under the National Lotteries Control Act and, therefore, all of the subsidiary questions, Madam President, do not arise. In the circumstances, I will detain this House no further. I thank you, Madam President.

Question put and agreed to.

Senate adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 5.14 p.m.