

**SENATE***Tuesday, March 23, 2021*

The Senate met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**[MADAM PRESIDENT *in the Chair*]**MUTUAL ASSISTANCE IN CRIMINAL MATTERS****(AMDT.) BILL, 2021**

Bill to amend the Mutual Assistance in Criminal Matters Act, Chap. 11:24, brought from the House of Representatives [*The Attorney General*]; read the first time.

**PAPER LAID**

Forty-Third Annual Report of the Ombudsman for the period January 2020 to December 2020. [*The Vice-President (Sen. Nigel de Freitas)*]

**URGENT QUESTIONS****Ansa McAl Group proposal for Vaccines****(Details of)**

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Madam President. To the hon. Minister of Health: Given the contradictory statements by Government and the Ansa McAl Group as to a proposal for the purchase/supply of 351,000 doses of the Pfizer vaccines, can the Minister indicate whether Ansa McAl requested payment in USD and a 2021 tax write-off, for said purchase?

**Madam President:** Minister of Health.

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, there are absolutely no contradictory statements on behalf of the Government. And to clarify the matter for the benefit of

the UNC and the population, I quote from a letter dated February 19, 2021, written by Anthony N. Sabga III, to myself. I will quote the two relevant paragraphs to answer the question:

However, in order to meet our commitment we kindly request that GORTT ensure that an adequate supply of US currency is made available through Ansa Merchant Bank to enable us to purchase these doses in a timely manner.

That answers the US currency part.

Further we also request that for all, not only Ansa, but for all private sector companies such as ourselves, which purchase vaccines for the exclusive use by GORTT in vaccinating the public, that a contribution be 100 per cent fully credited against taxes payable for the year of income 2021.

So there is no confusion. We are perfectly clear and I read into *Hansard* the two paragraphs from the letter dated Friday 19 February, 2021.

**Sen. Mark:** Madam President, can I ask the Minister whether the Government was in a financial position to pay the US \$8.4 million for the purchase of the 351,000 doses of Pfizer vaccines?

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** The answer is yes. This offer came out of a meeting requested and arranged by the Ministry of Health because people were reaching out to me personally, Chambers of Commerce and all of those persons. We facilitated a meeting. They asked us what our needs are and where they could help. They were willing to help with everything from storage of vaccines to transport, to provision of people, to the provision of vehicles. They also asked us what was the cost of these vaccines and we gave them the cost. We were always prepared to fund these ourselves but the private sector wanted to be a part of it and we simply

indicated to them what the cost of these vaccines would have been. At no time did we go to them to ask them to pay. They volunteered. Thank you very much.

**Mr. Mark:** Can the Minister clarify therefore, the statement made by the CEO of Ansa McAl to the effect that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago requested Ansa McAl's intervention in the purchase of the 351,000 doses of Pfizer vaccines?

**Madam Chairman:** Sen. Mark, I will not allow that question. Next question, Sen. Lutchmedial.

### **Procurement of COVID-19 Vaccines**

#### **(Arrangements with Business Organizations)**

**Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial:** To the hon. Minister of Health: Can the Minister indicate the nature of any arrangements discussed with business organizations in Trinidad and Tobago to assist the Government in procuring COVID-19 vaccines?

**Madam President:** Minister of Health.

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh):** So this question flows from the first one. I will repeat again. The private sector, as they did last year when they supplied everything from meals, PPE, a whole host of goods and services, again reached out to me personally and to the Ministry to offer their assistance. We facilitated a meeting with all these agencies, Chambers of Commerce, and so on, on the 17<sup>th</sup> of February and no specific arrangements have been made to date.

But let me add, I have also reached out to Ansa McAl and the Supermarkets Association to continue our dialogue, and they have both agreed that we will continue our dialogue in the interest of Trinidad and Tobago. And as I am rightly quoted in the newspaper today, once we have a product coming out of those discussions that is fully baked, fully cooked and palatable to the public, we will make a joint announcement. And that is my approach to dealing with Ansa McAl, Anthony Sabga III and Mr. Rajiv Diptee and they have both agreed that we will

continue to work together until we have a programme that is based on WHO-approved vaccines and that is safe for the public.

**Sen. Lutchmedial:** In the absence of a specific agreement to date, can you give us the status of the 351,000 doses of vaccines order from Pfizer, which would be able to vaccinate approximately 175,000 people in this country?

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** So, Madam President, as we all know there is a global shortage of vaccines. From that time to now, Pfizer has not gotten back to us with a firm commitment as to dates and/or price. So without Pfizer coming back to us with dates of delivery and/or pricing, because of the global shortage of vaccines we cannot proceed.

May I also put on the record, it was reported today that even Johnson & Johnson now cannot supply the US Government with the doses of vaccines promised to the US Government. That is the state of play globally.

**Sen. Lutchmedial:** Minister, in light of what you said about no fixed date or price, is it that the price of US \$8.4 million no longer stands in relation to this potential order of vaccines from Pfizer?

**Hon. T. Deyalsingh:** These were indicative prices. We have asked for confirmation of prices and confirmation of estimated times of deliveries. That, we have not had as yet as we sit here now.

### 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 will be answering question Nos. 80 and 81. We ask for a deferral of two weeks for question No. 82.

In addition, on the written questions, question No. 92, which is due, we ask for a deferral of two weeks for question No. 92.

**Madam President:** So question No. 82 and question No. 92 are deferred for two weeks. Sen. Mark.

### ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

*The following question stood on the Order paper in the name of Sen. Wade Mark:*

#### Failure to Wear Face Mask

##### (Implementation of System to Receive Payment)

- 82.** In light of reports that there are no systems in place to receive payments of the \$1,000 fine for failing to wear a face mask in a vehicle, vessel or in public, can the hon. Attorney General indicate when will the appropriate systems be put in place?

*Question, by leave, deferred.*

#### Challenges Facing Livestock Industry

##### (Measures to Address)

- 80. Sen. Wade Mark** asked the hon. Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries:

Given the livestock feed shortage, the decline in production and the rising cost of labour affecting livestock farmers, what specific measures are being considered to address said challenges facing the industry?

**Madam President:** Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Thank you very much, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*] Based on information I have before me at this time, there is no shortage of livestock feed on the local market.

Madam President, in late 2020 and early 2021, local importers of grain, and those are private sector importers, experienced delays in their shipments due to

delays in loading at overseas ports. That situation has been resolved. Madam President, the two issues which continue to be factors in relation to the pricing of local feed to the livestock sector are rising grain prices on the global market and the ability of our importers to access foreign exchange at the times needed to take advantage of dips in prices on the global market.

One supplier, Madam President, the National Feed Mills recently announced a 14 per cent increase in price. The NFM is not a significant feed supplier to the chicken producers, but supplies feed to other types of livestock. The 14 per cent price increase, Madam President, passed on to the purchasers is only a portion of the price increase incurred by NFM and all the other feed manufacturers. And this is in respect of December 2020 and shipments in 2021, so far.

Madam President, the other main supplier to the livestock market is Nutrimix, and that company has so far absorbed the price increases, and their prices continue to be lower than the NFM, providing livestock farmers with a choice between the two main suppliers of feed to the livestock sector.

Madam President, the local poultry sector continues to work with the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Ministry of Finance on the forex issues, in an effort to stabilize prices and secure the future grain shipments to the country.

In relation to the local livestock sector, Madam President, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries continues to implement a Cabinet-approved improvement plan for the sector. And this is underpinned by public/private partnerships like the Aripo Livestock Limited PPP, and other measures directed to supporting local livestock farmers. Thank you very much.

**Sen. Mark:** Thank you, Madam President. Can I ask the hon. Minister what specific measures are being taken by the Ministry of Trade and Industry to address the foreign exchange situation affecting the livestock farmers who seem to be

getting—

**Madam President:** You are asking the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries about measures adopted by the Ministry of Trade and Industry?

**Sen. Mark:** Yes, because that is what he just said.

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Madam President, the most important measure taken by the Government in relation to forex for the local manufacturers, particularly exporters, is the creation of a special facility at the Eximbank and that facility was in place in the last fiscal year, and has been replenished for this fiscal year. And the manufacturers who have accessed it have expressed great satisfaction in its ability to assist them in doing their business. And generally, the Ministry of Trade and Industry, in relation to livestock feed and those things, the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, would make interventions to the Ministry of Finance in relation to matters of forex and other matters, and as far as possible, given the issues with forex in relation to the availability, would try to assist those in our industry and in manufacturing and production on the whole. Thank you.

**Sen. Mark:** Can I ask the hon. Minister whether the livestock farmers have access to the Eximbank to deal with their foreign exchange situation?

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Madam President, the livestock farmers, we are dealing with feed prices. So the feed, local feed for the livestock farmers is sold by Nutrimix and NFM, as I have articulated in the opening question and response, and it is not the livestock farmers who access forex or access the Eximbank or anything like that. The relationship is between the livestock farmers and the retailers of feed. The retailers are supplied either by Nutrimix or NFM and the forex issues are addressed at the level of the importer, which would be the manufacturer of the local feed using imported grain input.

**Sen. Mark:** Can the hon. Minister therefore indicate whether both Nutrimix and NFM are experiencing challenges as it relates to accessing foreign exchange at the Eximbank?

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Madam President, the National Flour Mills, along with some other state entities, National Flour Mills is a publicly-listed company, partially owned by the State and those entities have special arrangements in relation to forex. And Nutrimix, a private company, has access to its private banking arrangements, and as a manufacturer has access to the Eximbank facilities and I cannot say that any one of these have difficulties accessing foreign exchange. But I can say that in relation to grain, because this question is about feed prices, the way the global market for grain operates, grain is sold on the basis of future deliveries, is sometimes stable and sometimes very, very volatile and the importers would like to take advantage of those times when the prices dip and are competitive. And at that exact moment they would like to have forex and sometimes the dip in prices is not matched by the immediate availability of forex. So they would like to have some predictability so that they could lock in their grain supply on the futures market and hedge against volatility. Thank you.

**Sen. Mark:** May I ask the hon. Minister: How has this 14 per cent increase in feed prices impacted on consumers as it relates to poultry prices in Trinidad and Tobago?

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, that question will not be allowed. Next question, Sen. Mark.

### **Depression Rating Scales**

#### **(Potential Use of)**

**81. Sen. Wade Mark** asked the hon. Minister of Education:



Can the Minister indicate when will depression rating scales be introduced to the Ministry's online learning programme to facilitate early identification of children who may be experiencing depression?

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Madam President, thank you very much. I thank Sen. Mark for this question. Madam President, the Ministry of Education is in the process of developing an online screening tool to facilitate the early identification of children at risk, rather than utilizing depression rating scales. This screening tool, Madam President, is an adaptation of three commonly utilized rating tools: the mental health inventory, paediatric symptom checklist and diagnostic and statistical measure of mental health.

Madam President, the Development Assessment Intervention Unit of the Ministry of Education is currently undertaking research to determine the effectiveness and cultural applicability of this tool for students of Trinidad and Tobago before it is considered as part of the suite of offerings provided by the Student Support Services Division of the Ministry.

Madam President, this rating tool can provide a quick snapshot of the users' mental health and help determine whether they are experiencing symptoms associated with depression. The pilot testing of the rating tool is projected to commence within term three of the academic year, 2021. Thank you very much.

**Sen. Mark:** Madam President, may I ask the hon. Minister, having regard to the existence of online classes for almost a year now, can the Minister indicate why it has taken that length of time for the Ministry to even consider the introduction of what has been described as screening tools to identify early, kids who might be in a state of depression? Can the Minister explain this to this honourable Senate?

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Madam President, the identification of barriers to

learning of children, adults, people in the learning environment, is not new. The Ministry of Education has had the Student Support Services Division. It has had the Development Assessment Intervention Unit for a long time. And it is the purpose of these units to provide the sort of assessment and identification of issues which serve as barriers to educating our children in particular. So that, it is not new. This is a tool that is being developed, given the switch to education in an online environment.

Some of the issues which have made themselves more prominent during the COVID-19 period are some of the things that the Ministry of Education believes are likely to affect some of our students in the learning environment. But it is not new. There has been no delay. As the issues have arisen, and as the Ministry confronts new challenges and new barriers to learning, particularly in the online environment, it has taken the steps to develop the tool, have it tested and determine its applicability across the board in the learning environment. Thank you.

**Sen. Mark:** Madam President, can the Minister indicate whether he can share with this honourable Senate how many children have been identified, given the fact that this is not new, and is an ongoing exercise involving the Ministry? Can the Minister indicate whether he can share with this Senate how many children have been identified by the Ministry suffering from mental depression as a result of these online classes? Can the Minister explain that to us?

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Madam President, I am not in a position to provide that information.

**Sen. Mark:** Can the Minister give this honourable Senate an undertaking because of the gravity of the situation where some 46,000 children are yet to be connected online, in terms of classes? Can the Minister give this honourable Senate an undertaking that he will provide in writing this very important information that is

requested. Can we have that undertaking from the Minister?

**Sen. The Hon. C. Rambharat:** Madam President, I undertake a week from today to provide the information, the current information relating to the handling of depression amongst children in the learning environment, based on the data available to the Ministry of Education at this time.

### **SEXUAL OFFENCES (AMDT.) BILL, 2021**

Bill to amend the Sexual Offences Act, Chap. 11:28 [*The Attorney General*]; read the first time.

### **STANDING ORDERS REVERSION OF SPEAKING TIME**

[Second Day]

*Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question* [February 23, 2021]:

*Be it resolved* that the Senate revert to the speaking time as set out in the Standing Orders with immediate effect. [*Sen. W. Mark*]

*Question again proposed.*

**Madam President:** On the last occasion that this matter came up, there were 10 persons who made contributions.

**Sen. Damian Lyder:** Thank you, Madam President. And today, Madam President, we continue the debate on the Motion brought by Sen. Wade Mark on the curtailment of the speaking time and the Government's attempt, once again, to silence the Opposition and by extension any voice that is opposing to their views.

Madam President, I am reminded of a quote by the late Martin Luther King Jr. when he said, I quote:

“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter.”

But, Madam President, we in the loyal Opposition are not fearful of this Government and their act in cutting our speaking time, because we are staying true to our oath to serve the people without fear, and this we shall do. Madam

President, we simply will not be silenced.

Madam President, today we are brought to the Parliament to speak on a matter that strikes to the very heart of our democracy, because it is a long upheld tradition of the Opposition to have its say to serve as fetter and as a check and balance on the power of this Government. Yet we are here to explain why we must be given our rights that have been taken away from us by this Government simply by the excuse of a pandemic.

But, Madam President, let us examine the science behind this parliamentary speaking lockdown. Madam President, the Government has hidden behind the statement that they are taking advice from medical professionals. But what they are doing is that they are locking us down without any advice. You see, the mantra is always some excuse. The first five years was “blame Kamla”. Now it is “blame COVID” for every decision that they make. There is no medical advice that they have presented to the Parliament to corroborate that the Government’s assertion that if you rise in this Chamber and speak for more than 20 minutes, that you will get the COVID virus, or that you may spread it.

Madam President, from the moment any medical officer bucks the trend and contradicts the Government, they are ostracized. And if the Government is stating that they are adhering to science, then what exactly is the science?

How many Members of Parliament have contracted COVID? I think I heard the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs in glowing terms, boastful that no one in the Parliament has contracted COVID and no members of staff have contracted COVID. But how do we know no members of staff or no Members in the Parliament have contracted COVID? Because how do you know if some Members could be asymptomatic? Has the Government even tested any of the Members before they made this assertion?

**Sen. Dr. Browne:** Member, would you give way?

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Have all 71 Members, as well as the clerks, security personnel and the hospitality attendants that—

**Sen. Dr. Browne:** Member, would you give way?

**Sen. D. Lyder:**—that frequent the Chamber? Madam President, I only have 30 minutes, Madam President. If I had 40, I would love to give way, but I only have 30 minutes, unfortunately.

**Sen. Dr. Browne:** I was just trying to help you.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Next time when we get the 40 minutes I will give all the way the hon. Minister wants. Yes. But let us compare other jurisdictions in the Commonwealth, and so, right? Each country has handled the outbreak differently. But the protocols remain the same, Madam President: six feet apart, hand washing, wear face masks, temperature checks, and so forth.

And in the UK for example, they were hit one of the hardest in the world, they were hit. But they never imposed any restrictions or tampered with the speaking time of their Members. So what is the endgame we have here in the Senate? And that is the ability for Members of Parliament to debate matters of importance to every citizen. So we can basically operate. We decide we can cut the numbers in the Parliament, we can have the protocols in place. So I mean, we could agree with all these things. But we are not comfortable with the restriction of our speaking time.

Imagine, Madam President, when we come to debate serious matters such as the procurement legislation, and we are limited to only 20 minutes to discuss this. And when we come here in December, Madam President, with a slew of Bills that this Government has railroaded through the Parliament, yet we only have 20 minutes to execute it.

**2.00 p.m.**

Madam President, if we cannot say it here, we will not just simply stay quiet, you know, we will go outside and we will say it outside. That is why we see today, Madam President, so many people outside there speaking out against this Government. They cannot get their voice through the Opposition here so they go outside and they speak.

But Madam President, the other issue that we have with this limitation of speaking time is this indefinite nature of the time change. Now, we look at the UK Parliament, the House of Commons Chamber proceedings during the pandemic made a temporary arrangement with a cutoff date of the 30<sup>th</sup> of March, 2021, to enable MPs to participate remotely.

Of course, Madam President, the UK is unlike Trinidad and Tobago. They are currently vaccinating their population, so they can set clear timelines as to when they can open up. Is the time frame on restrictions indefinite here in Trinidad because we have no vaccination strategy in place as yet? Maybe—I do not think we even need the line for the vaccines. This Government is not laying out to the Members of Parliament the parameters around the speaking time and when we expect to get back to normal. There is no plan. It is done most ad hoc.

Madam President, let me cite the protocols that are established in the UK Parliament. A simple visit to the UK Parliament website would inform you that the changes that were made during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is the UK Parliament, you know, Madam President, the place where we take pattern in shaping the parameters of our parliamentary democracy. It would be interesting to record for the sake of the *Hansard* the measures that were taken by the UK Government in their Parliament. So, if I may get an opportunity to read this. The House of Commons set out public health guidelines which are largely in line with

the World Health Organization protocols. There were four main changes to the way MPs could:

“...participate in parliamentary business in the Chamber during the coronavirus pandemic.”

Mainly:

1. “Social distancing measures in the Chamber to meet public health guidelines;”
2. “Call lists, published in advance to manage attendance in the Chamber during parliamentary business;”
3. “Remote participation in proceedings; and”
4. “New ways of voting, including an extension of the current proxy voting scheme.”

Madam President, when I read there, there was nothing stated about curtailing the speaking time of a Member. So is it that the British is not following the science that we are following here in Trinidad and Tobago? Or is it that we are not following the advice of our own medical scientists, and are just making it up as we go along, by “vaps”? Or maybe, I am not sure but I am asking, maybe it is the intention of the Government to silence the Opposition? I do not know.

Madam President, if we are adhering to the protocols that are laid down by the WHO as the Government states, then we should be able to proceed. What the Government did is tantamount to an indefinite lockdown of the Parliament and our speaking. So where we go from here? We decide that next time we will just lockdown Private Members’ Day because we deem it unnecessary?

Madam President, we look at other jurisdictions and we see them using technology, you know, rather than reducing speaking time. Yet, here in our Parliament we are saying we are following a science. What exactly is the science,

Madam President? I think my colleague, Sen. Roberts, was in the process of speaking about science and I think he had to urgently leave, I am not sure but he left. So I will pick up where he left from, Madam President.

And I want to say a quote. It was a British writer and journalist, Graham Hancock who said, and I quote:

“If this is how science operates, by silencing those who express opposing views rather than by debating with them, then science is dead and we are in a new era of the Inquisition.”

Is this what we have now, Madam President? Is this the type of governance we have? Governance that is akin to an inquisition?

The UK Parliament, however, utilized technology to strengthen their parliamentary democracy. Their website states on “Remote Participation” and I will quote:

“When the House of Commons was recalled on 30 December 2020, MPs agreed to extend remote participation in proceedings in the Chamber to all MPs.

This means that all MPs can participate remotely in:

- Departmental questions
- Urgent questions, and ministerial statements
- Debates, including moving a motion
- Presentation of petitions”

Not a single mention, Madam President, in that quote to the curtailment of the speaking time. But instead of following the example of the UK, the Government decided to go down this rabbit hole of hiding behind this unique brand of science invented here that requires our debates to be cut short.

Madam President, it is the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs who



spoke to the same WHO measures being instituted here, so we are already following the science. We are. However, it was only last year in the Eleventh Parliament with only three of us on the Opposition were allowed to sit in the Chamber. I think half of the Government had to stay outside, half of the Independents. It was then that—due to the risks then, we had to stay out. But what happens? We come back in the Twelfth Parliament, after elections, and everybody is allowed to come back in the Parliament. What changed at this point? What new science did we learn in this point?

In fact, Madam President, if I recall correctly at that very time the COVID-19 virus was in full surge. It was right after election I think the Government had just started testing at this point, properly, or maybe not. But whatever testing they did, there was a surge at that time. So you have this big surge in COVID-19 and everybody allowed to come back in the Parliament. But we still cannot talk our full time.

So in very much the same way that they have no scientific evidence that increasing the speaking time causes COVID, they have done so many other faux pas, Madam President, in this decision making. I mean, I could draw a few references. You could go to a restaurant and sit down with 12 persons at a table but you cannot share a glass of wine. “Ah doh know if the COVID go jump out de wine on to dey chest, but yuh cyah do dat.” Meanwhile, you could rub shoulders in a maxi-taxi from Port of Spain, spend an hour going all the way to Arima, if you could get there in an hour. But you cannot sit down in this Parliament—in this Senate six feet away from your colleague and speak your full time.

We could go on a beach and cook curry duck and play small goal but we “cyah go by the river side with de same duck and run ah stew chicken and take ah lil paddle in ah canoe”. What science is this? There are Ministers here, Madam

President, who go every day to their Ministries, where their staff is out in full pelt. Yes, they are following the protocols, they are following the COVID-19 protocols, some Ministries better than others. And some of these Ministries that are essential to the services of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, they are out there working. Is it not possible for our very same colleagues on the other side who attend their Ministries during the week to contract COVID in a full pelt with a full working day, and not come inside of here and give me COVID when I speaking “meh” 30 minutes now? It was 20, but now 30. Is that not possible? So why is the Parliament different? Why is there this prejudicial treatment to parliamentary time?

If the treatment, Madam President, was the same then the staff of the Ministry of Tourism should not come out in full force and should go home early, very early, maybe 20 minutes, come for 20 minutes and leave. Madam President, in many of the other Ministries maybe they should only come out at their desks for a 20 minutes and deal with the staff for 20 minutes—and sorry, deal with the citizens for 20 minutes and go home, because is less chance for them to get COVID.

And there are all these other essential services, the food service, the pharmaceutical service, the financial services, that are all operating at full pelt, Madam President. They should go home after serving customers for 20 minutes even though they are following the scientific protocols. And, Madam President, I put it to you that the Parliament is an essential service because parliamentary debates are essential to the governing of this nation.

Madam President, when we examine the measures to be taken by individuals recommended by the World Health Organization, they are very basic you know, and I quote them. Maintain at one meter distance from others and wear a mask if you cannot guarantee the distance. Cover a sneeze or a cough with a tissue or bent

elbow and immediately dispose the tissue in a closed lid bin. Avoid touching your eyes, nose and mouth. Wash your hands frequently with soap water or sanitize. That is the science. We know. This is the science that is outlined by WHO. The British Parliament has followed it. They have applied technology as well to ensure that they expand and not diminish democracy, but they have not cut parliamentary speaking time.

Madam President, if I had my extra ten minutes I would not have only given a way to the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, but I would have taken time to speak about New Zealand, and the fact that they have incorporated technology and other protocols in accordance with WHO, and they too have not curtailed the speaking time in their Parliament. Madam President, other jurisdictions do not limit speaking time of individual members but I am running out of time myself. So let me take the opportunity to respond to a few contributions that I listened to in the last day that we debated this Motion.

And I would like to respond to the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs who posed a question to my colleague Sen. Mark, and I quote, I looked at it several times, he said to Sen. Mark:

“Why did he waste the Parliament’s time today to argue for something that basically has already been achieved?”

Madam President, I am not certain if—no, I am certain that the hon. Minister sits in the same Senate with me. And I know the only thing that is achieved is the Government acting in haste knowing that this Motion was being brought by Sen. Mark, comes and changes the time somewhat to sort of discredit this Motion. And they come and they give the opening batsman the full speaking time of 45 minutes, but then come and give the rest of the lineup 30. Why not 40? So now the science tells you 10 minutes? Now we could get a little extra 10 minutes, you would not

“ketch” the COVID. You can get a lil extra 10 minutes.

So, I know the hon. Minister is a very educated man. So he knows that 40 minus 30 equals 10. So there is still 10 minutes according to our Standing Orders that are due to us. So this debate is actually not moot. The irony, Madam President, is that they changed the time here but not in the other place my understanding is that. I would like to know the science behind that one? Is it that COVID lays in the lower levels and does not come up to the upper levels? I do not know.

Madam President, secondly, the goodly Minister who, you know, we hear it, the tongues around town saying that he may be the next leader of the PNM, well we wish him best of luck. It is very shocking that someone who may be touted as a leader, that this Member would say something as important as one's constitutional rights to speak in this Senate would be a waste of time, especially when we are debating Bills and passing regulations that could affect the constitutional rights of the citizens of our country. And the case of this Government's recent history, basically trampling on the democracy with some of the Bills that they have brought to this Parliament.

So in terms of waste of time, I would not say the same for my colleague, the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, who I listened to very intently in the budget debate, a debate by the way that we were given full time to speak on. I suppose COVID did not come around during the budget debate. But, I listened to my colleague and I was mesmerized by the amount of meetings that he had, and the amount of people he met. He met diplomat A, he also met diplomat B, also met diplomat C, I think, Madam President, he might have met every single diplomat in this country except maybe the Indian High Commissioner to discuss vaccines. I think that was the only meeting that did not happen. But I am not going to go down that road because we are not debating about vaccines or the lack of them for the

country. But, Madam President, the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs went further to state, and I quote:

“Why do you not allow...”

I think he was referring to something that the Leader of Government Business was stating:

“Why do you not allow Private Members’ Day to be used for something more substantive in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago?”

Madam President, what is more substantive in the interest of Trinidad and Tobago is to have an Opposition that serves as checks and balances on this Government, to have the ability to narrate a fulsome debate on critical matters that affect the constitutional rights of our citizens? Madam President, I mean, I could give you some examples when the Government brought the procurement legislation to the Parliament, there were serious repercussions to the nation.

**Madam President:** Sen. Lyder, I just want to caution you to not begin the process of re-debating issues that have already been dealt with in this particular session.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Right, well, Madam President, I was actually just going to glance through them so if you give some small leeway, I will just glance through. I would not take long on them. I thank you for your kindness, Madam President.

So, I do not think they mentioned that you know, the private sector and the civil society clamoured together in 24 hours and ran to a press conference to discuss, you know, to call on the Government to pull back that piece of legislation. The Law Association came out and said, “Pull it back, our taxpayers’ money, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund all at risk here”. Madam President, was that not substantive to be debated? When we look at the Evidence Bill, when we examine the financial Bills that came throughout the year, the whole suite of legislation that we debate, all serious. They all deserve a fulsome debate—

**Sen. Mitchell:** Madam President, a point of order, 46(1) please.

**Madam President:** The Minister is invoking a point of order.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** I have to speak on.

**Madam President:** No. Senator, a point of order is being invoked.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Okay, no problem.

**Madam President:** Minister.

**Sen. Mitchell:** Madam President, 46(1) please, that is not before us. Evidence Bill is not before us.

**Madam President:** Yes, well move on Sen. Lyder, as you said you will.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** No problem, Madam President. But I will tell him 46(1) is not irrelevant because we need time to debate those Bills.

**Madam President:** And I am asking you, Sen. Lyder, to just move on.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Yes, Madam President, your guidance is always appreciated. So, unless the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs is saying that the Bills that were brought to Parliament by the Attorney General, the Minister of Finance, were frivolous and did not merit the Parliament's time, our full 40 minutes of speaking, we cannot dispatch those sort of Bills, and if the hon. Minister of Tourism had let me go, I would have said we cannot debate those Bills with a scant contribution of 20 minutes and now 30.

Madam President, the goodly Minister is a doctor, Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, and I would have thought when he was coming to contribute he would have spoken to us about the science or some new science that allowed us 10 more minutes of speaking time. Instead, you know, he comes to criticize Sen. Mark and speak about chickens crossing "ah" road. So that is not a waste of time? I would talk to him, if he will let me, about the chickens more outside I would love to know.

So the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs saw it to condemn Sen. Mark, saying that the Member and I say this:

“...a voice completely disconnected from the reality with which the rest of us are treating on a daily basis.”

Madam President, I put it to you that if there is anyone that is disconnected from what is happening in this country, it is this Government. [*Desk thumping*] When we see the decimation of our economy, when people are suffering and the constitutional rights are being taken away from them including our speaking time, including our speaking time, because it is through the voice of the Opposition given our speaking time that the average citizen has the opportunity to speak truth to power.

Madam President, I could vividly remember and recall when we remained in Parliament until 2.00 a.m. in December. I think the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs was there, he was there with me. So, are we saying that on that occasion COVID-19 was dormant? It was in fact the Leader of Government Business in the Chamber who stood and asked for an extension of time to debate the Bill to its entirety. Did COVID-19 take a vacation then?

And you know, Madam President, an even more serious question has to be asked here if that is the case. Is it that the hon. Attorney General and the Leader of Government Business in their haste to railroad Bills through this Parliament by extending the hours of debate to suit their agenda, despite the science that they have brought to us, limited speaking time, did they put our lives at risk? Where is the consistency in the science? Did they put the lives of all the staff at risk in the Parliament by extending the time? I thought we were supposed to leave early to limit the time. But when we want to speak for the time that is set out in our Standing Orders, we are accused of somehow being members opposed to—

opposite, wanting to risk lives. Is that the case?

Madam President, it was just last week in the Anti-Gang Bill when we went on late into the evening. Are we saying that COVID-19 avoided the Parliament that time again? Madam President, this argument by speaking from 20 or 30 minutes therefore cannot be a serious position by anyone on the other side. Definitely, science was not considered then. The Government as I said, conveniently hides behind science when they deem it necessary to end our sitting early.

I want to take the opportunity, Madam President, to respond to Sen. de Freitas. And when we see the seriousness of these Bills, Madam President, and I listened to the contribution of Sen. de Freitas, a Member who I pay very close attention to. Sen. de Freitas claimed that, “Sen. Mark is mixing up quality over quantity.” Sen. de Freitas said, you can spend 45 minutes talking nonsense in the Chamber—

**Madam President:** Sen. Lyder, you have five more minutes.

**Sen. D. Lyder:** Thank you, Madam President. You can spend 45 minutes talking nonsense in the Chamber and yes, I very often hear it or you could spend 10 minutes and make a brilliant contribution.

Thanks, thank you. And the hon. Member went further to state the amount of time you take has nothing to do with the quality of the debate or the quality of the contribution. But, Madam President, if a Member has 45 minutes of quality, or 40 minutes of quality, should he not be heard? Madam President, he goes on to say that a skilful orator can make his contribution fit in whatever time is allotted. That was what he stated. But what if the Member has a brilliant contribution to make but may not have all those skills that are required?

Madam President, not everyone has the skills that the six of us on the Opposition side have, you know. Madam President, ultimately, not every Bill is the



same. Some Bills require more in-depth contribution than others. Many of us find ourselves running and scratching out of time especially when we are prosecuting very serious Bills.

So whereas I may agree with Sen. de Freitas that some Bills may require only a 10 or 15 minutes presentation, other critical Bills, Madam President, require the full times as set out in our Standing Orders. Because if we are debating Bills that affect the constitutional rights of citizens that could impact them negatively, and even one of us on this side protects those citizens by having our ability to speak our full time, then, Madam President, we have served the country according to our Oath of Office. Madam President, I have to respectfully submit that I disagree completely with my friend Sen. de Freitas on this point. I would like to listen to Sen. de Freitas more with full speaking time because he often offsets the mediocrity on the other side.

Madam President, we have made our case as I conclude here now, Madam President. We made our case that this curtailment of speaking time does not sit within the pale of democratic decency. I therefore submit that this Motion as has been advanced by Sen. Mark, Leader of the Opposition Business in the Senate, is merited and it is timely.

I wish to conclude with the words of the 44<sup>th</sup> US President, President Barack Obama, and I quote:

“...those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history, but that we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.”

Madam President, we on this side are willing to extend a hand if they will unclench their fist. We will work with them in the Opposition in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, but we must do so according to the rights that have been

enshrined in our Constitution. So it is clear, Madam President, the Government must immediately reinstate our full speaking time for the rest of the batsmen. They must allow the Opposition, the Independents, everyone the opportunity, and especially the Opposition, who represent more than 309,000 people. And I would think now given what has been going on in this country we probably have about 600,000 behind us now, Madam President. And we have to be the vehicle and the voice and we have to be given the right to speak. So, Madam President, I ask the Government to give us our 10 minutes. Those few words, Madam President, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy. [*Desk thumping and crosstalk*] May I ask Members to desist from that loud crosstalk? Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy.

**Sen. Dr. Maria Dillon-Remy:** Thank you, Madam President, for allowing me to contribute to this debate, private Motion brought by Sen. Mark. Madam President, I will not be long. I really did not think that we would be debating again today having had the extension of time when we met on February the 23<sup>rd</sup>, but I understand the need for the discussion. So I am honoured today to contribute today to the Motion relating to the suspension of the Standing Order 43(1), “Speaking Time”, which was taken on August 29, 2020, when the Senate agreed to the time limit for speeches and debates being limited to 30 minutes for the mover or Member wrapping up and the first speaker on the Opposition and Independent Benches, and 20 minutes for all other speakers. Madam President, I really—when on February the 23<sup>rd</sup>, the Leader of Government Business, hon. Franklin Khan, moved a Motion and it reads:

“...further to the Motion passed on August 29, 2020, in relation to the suspension of the Standing Order 43(1), “Speaking Time”, I beg to move that a further adjustment to the time limit for speeches in debates during the

period of the COVID-19 pandemic: 45 minutes for the mover, 40 minutes for the first responders on the opposite Benches, and 30 minutes for all other speakers and the Member wrapping up.”

We are here today because this clearly has not been an acceptable compromise in terms of time. And Sen. Mark’s argument was that while:

“...citizens are being encouraged to adapt to the ‘new normal’ while observing COVID-19 safety protocols;”

And therefore:

“...the business of the Parliament should similarly adapt to the ‘new normal’ by allowing for the full time for Speeches in Debates;”

Madam President, I looked at some adjustments that have been made in different Parliaments and Sen. Lyder just made reference to some of them. But I would first mention what was put in an article by the ParlAmericas. ParlAmericas’ article, it was a publication, “COVID-19 and Parliament’s Role During the Pandemic”. And some of the measures that were mentioned, “Parliamentary Sessions and Related Meetings”, so this was part of what was happening in addition to other recommendations that were made by those Parliament. And some of these included:

- “Suspend parliamentary plenary sessions or limit sittings to plenary sessions that address essential legislation
- Allow parliamentarians to work from their constituency office or home
- Conduct all sittings with only the necessary personnel and without a physically-present public audience
- Suspend in-person committee meetings or limit committee meetings to those focusing on legislation relevant to the health situation or oversight

of the government's response to the situation

- If in-person plenary sessions or committee meetings are necessary, ensure there is sufficient space (following distancing recommendations from the WHO or local health authorities) between individuals
- Make plenary sessions and committee meetings less frequent and of shorter duration (see e.g., reduced debate times in the Chamber of Deputies of Mexico)"

**2.30 p.m.**

So it was one of the things that was considered.

“Create mechanisms for journalists to participate in press briefings remotely  
Suspend functions”

So there are many other areas that they mentioned. But suspension of—decreasing debating time was also one of the measures that was made.

So, Madam President, if we were at this time still dealing with the 30 minutes for the mover and 20 minutes for everybody else, I would have certainly been in agreement with Sen. Mark, but I have noted the Government's response in terms of making more time available and I would just like to say we are not out of the COVID pandemic situation. [*Desk thumping*] We are still in the middle of a pandemic and therefore, it is not business as usual as far as I understand it. Right now as we speak, we have third wave in many countries, we have additional lockdown in many countries, as we know what is happening right now in Germany, in France, Italy, are some of the countries that are experiencing further lockdown as a result of the COVID pandemic.

So, while I agree that adjustments need to be made, I do not see that what has happened here is a curtailment of our speaking time or that the Government is

seeking to shut parliamentarians up. I saw this as a part of what we were doing in a responsible Parliament, in terms of making the decisions as to how we can manage time differently. I do agree that there may be adjustments to time, as what happened for the budget and that as some of the other Senators mentioned, when we have extremely long Bills that there should be further adjustments in times. But I do not feel that what is happening here is a measure of trying to curtail speech but a time to monitor and manage what we are doing as a Parliament. And I would also say that this is not something that is necessarily as, let us say, as scientific as Sen. Lyder was talking about in terms of, that if you spend 10 more minutes, that you are going to get COVID, whereas if you spend 10 minutes less, you are not going to get COVID. I did not think that it was that kind of discussion but that it was a discussion that says listen, we have to make adjustments, what are the kinds of adjustments that we need to make? And I would think that we would need to make further adjustment depending on what happens subsequently.

In other words, if we stay like this and if the situation gets better I would imagine that we should be back to our normal time of speaking. But if there are numbers increasing as we are seeing right now that is happening in the country, I would imagine that we may have to adjust again. So in my understanding of what is happening over the last year is that adjustments have had to be made, and that this House was seeking to make those adjustments appropriately, as discussed the—our response to, or debating in terms of the activities that we have to do as a Parliament.

Madam President, as I said before, the COVID pandemic has shifted Parliaments around the globe, how they do business, and I mentioned some of them as far as the Parliament is concerned in terms of that document from ParlAmericas. But I would also mention what has happened in the UK.

Sen. Lyder would have made some of those statements but it was reported that in March—a Study of Parliament Group published in a document entitled, “Parliaments and the Pandemic” in January 2021, which highlighted the approach taken by the House of Commons to implement two regimes to address the pandemic. The House continues to operate under the second COVID regime. Additionally, the document also gave some insight into how the House of Lords responded to the pandemic. It reported:

“On 25 March”—2020—“once Royal Assent had been given to the Coronavirus Act 2020, the House...”—of Lords—“...agreed to a motion restricting until 21 May...”— 2020—“the kinds of business which could be taken. In moving it the Leader of the House (Baroness Evans...) announced that for the first three weeks from the return of the House on 21 April”—all this was last year, 2020—“the House would sit only on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, and would meet at 1 pm on Tuesdays...”

So there were time adjustments, and I would imagine that if you are adjusting time, you would also adjust the—what is happening in terms of how people can contribute. And it went on further to say further:

“Whereas previously Members wishing to ask a supplementary question had to stand up and (more often than not) compete with other Members wishing to do so, now Members had to sign up in advance, and the speaking list issued before each sitting by the Government Whips’...”

I would imagine that if this was happening in here, it may have been seen as Government trying to control but this is not what was happening. They were trying to see how best to utilize their time.

In another document, “COVID-19 CPA Toolkit for Commonwealth Parliamentarians” by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, even went

far as to suggest that:

“Presiding Officers...could temporarily suspend standing orders specifically related to quorums.”

—as a means of responsibly responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I highlight the measures that other Parliaments have taken in addressing this pandemic, to make the point that our Parliament’s response was not unusual or unique in my understanding of things. An unparalleled situation presented itself and it is one where the information and facts are still being unravelled day by day. Therefore, having regard to the foreseeable future, and the likely results of doing business as usual, steps have to be taken within reason.

Madam President, we must be clear in our minds, as I said again, that the COVID pandemic has not dissipated, it is still present in our world, is a much real threat and I urge us to continue to tread carefully and continue to dialogue. And if it is that there has not been enough dialogue with the Opposition and the Independent Benches, I would recommend this to the Government, that they make sure that appropriate discussion, and I mean, not just a discussion where you are probably telling somebody what you want to do, but appropriate discussion where you hear all sides, be it undertaken, so that people do not feel that they are being left out of a decision-making.

Madam President, with those few remarks, I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Sen. John.

**Sen. Jearlean John:** Thank you, Madam President, for the opportunity to join this debate. I wish to align myself with the Motion, and the very distinguished presentations by Senators Mark, Lutchmedial, Roberts, Nakhid, and from the earlier speakers in the Independent Bench, Senators Vieira and Deyalsingh.

Sen. Deyalsingh at the time said the whole idea that we have rights and

privileges, and freedom of speech here, is the importance that is meted out to the ability of Members to speak. Taking some time away from that I think it is an injustice in the sense that you are now infringing on those rights. And then he went on to remind us of Voltaire who said,

I may not agree with what you have to say but I'll defend to the death the right for you to say it.

Sen. Vieira also spoke on the last occasion, he said—he argued about the time, the increase in the amount of time, if it means that whether truncation of the time means that there are elements or segments of our population, who will feel unheard, alienated or unrepresented. And he said that is an unacceptable risk. The inconvenience of having to endure long speeches pales in comparison to the need for maintaining harmony and social peace in our beloved country.

Madam President, hon. Senators on the other side, they are presenting the Opposition, that the Opposition is engaging in summary, in useless talk. The Opposition talks for talking's sake. I suppose that fits into their narrative that the Opposition is irrelevant and therefore, must only be seen and heard with the permission of those on the Government side.

Madam President, the hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs chose to just dismiss Sen. Mark's Motion and I will probably have to requote.

The temptation was too great to the hon. Senator, it was too great. The magnetism of the opportunity to spend a full 45 minutes to ask for a full 45 minutes. And guess what—he said—he did exactly that this evening.

Madam President, I was disappointed at the hon. Minister's reflection, because as a medical professional whose foundation in national politics was guided by a true statesman of the stature of the former Prime Minister, Patrick Augustus Mervyn Manning, I expected better. With the hon. Sen. de Freitas, I was



disappointed but not surprised. You see, Madam President, expectation differs when you are nurtured by a statesman, such as Mr. Manning as opposed to a raging bull.

Madam President, it is not that the Opposition is being unreasonable, it is not that the Opposition is not aware of the unique challenges posed by COVID-19, and the hon. Senator, doctor who just spoke, she also raised some valid points. My colleague, Sen. Lutchmedial, made reference to Baroness Hale in her scathing rebuke of the UK Government for failing to draw up an effective framework for different levels of lockdown laws. And that is what we are saying, let us know, do not just tell us, impose your will on us but tell us; we are reasonable people. Because we understand the huge complexity of trying to deal with the pandemic. We live here, we are part of the global community, we see what is happening, we know how hard it is, as Baroness Hale said, we know how hard it is to make choices that have to be made.

Madam President, it is the same way it took almost a year before Sen. Mark sought to put this Motion before this honourable House. The Government felt no need to hold discussions with the Opposition or Independent Benches. Based on the contribution from their Benches they believe that the speaking time is their gift to withhold or to dispense. They believe the Public Health Ordinance gives them the right, not only to lock down the borders but also the mouths of the Members of the Opposition.

Madam President, the Government can use their majority to keep the borders closed, to enforce, of course, the WHO COVID-19 Guidelines. They do not need if they wish to, they do not need to order vaccines and keep us locked down for the next seven years, because the World Health Organization said those who are not in the line are likely to stay closed, may be for seven years. So imposing a truncated

speaking time is just another measure of this Government's all-out assault on the people's rights and our democracy.

Madam President, again, looking at their intention, because you can only come up with some kind of analysis based on what has been said in this honourable House. And again, our hon. Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs said, he said through you, Madam President, I have a simple question for him today, and that question is this: Why did he waste the Parliament's time?

So, it tells you that the Government is of the opinion that the Opposition is just wasting time when they come here to speak and that, I think, is the crux of the matter. It is not that, as I said before, that we are unreasonable, you know, he said, Madam President. By that, the hon. Senator could be interpreted to mean that Sen. Mark should just eat his biscuit and shut his mouth.

You see, in today's newspaper, someone described it as COVID dictatorship. One must ask: Why did the Government then make the amendments hurriedly and add 10 minutes on the same day that the Motion was placed on the Order Paper for the debate? Why? Madam President, because they knew they were wrong and that what they were doing was unjustified and an undemocratic takeover of the Senate Chamber and by extension our democracy.

Madam President, you see there is a newspaper called *The Washington Post*, I think it is 140 years old, and the tag line is "Democracy Dies in Darkness". In the same way, with this same pandemic that is plaguing this entire world—I do not know if you are aware, Madam President, but there is a report. When the reports of the new virus emerged in the Chinese city of Wuhan in December of 2019, a 34-year-old local doctor, Dr. Li, sent texts to fellow doctors, medical doctors about the virus. Soon after, the police accused him of spreading rumours and told him to sign a statement acknowledging his misdemeanor. All this has to do with free

expression. Unfortunately, this doctor died of COVID-19 a few weeks later and he triggered about two million posts, with the hashtag, #Iwantfreedomofspeech.

Madam President, in one of his last interviews before his death, Li said a healthy society should not have only one kind of voice. What we are speaking about, what we have brought on this agenda, and this Motion is about preserving our freedoms, that we do not take it for granted and that no one should just take it away from us because they feel, they feel like it is an inconvenience.

We are all willing to come here. When we come to this building, we all greet the security who are here kindly presenting themselves in service to the cause of the State, you know, they take your temperature, you do your sanitization, you have on your mask, et cetera, and you follow all the protocols that have been followed universally. We are not doing anything less. I think we are all responsible people. And I am just saying it is the manner in which it is done, the arbitrary manner in which this truncation was done because, Madam President, you see, this is no simple matter.

The obligation of governments to protect the public from this deadly pandemic is not *carte blanche* but they still cannot place a chokehold on information, and suppressing—if it is they think they are suppressing dissent, or free expression.

We are fully in agreement with the public health measures taken to protect everyone who comes through the doors of the Parliament, or across the length and breadth of Trinidad Tobago, this is our country after all. These measures are not unique. We accept the guidance of the World Health Organization that we are in extraordinary times and these call for extraordinary measures and whatever adjustments. And the hon. Sen. Mark never complained about that. He just complained that the suspension was arbitrary.

You see, Madam President, the natural instincts of this Government lead towards totalitarianism, and all over the world one is being cautioned that governments could use the cover of COVID-19 to trample on the rights of people. We are already in this state of endless lockdown because the Government has decided that every other country would avail themselves of whatever vaccine is available but they think that Trinidad and Tobago should just sit and wait and I suppose, cool it. So there is no way that we are going to return to any normal, whether new or old, we are just to sit and wait.

Madam President, I am not going to take my 30 minutes because I try [*Laughter*] to just do what is necessary. You see, governments should counter COVID-19 by encouraging people to “mask up”, not shut up. Governments and other state authorities should immediately end excessive restrictions on free speech in the name of preventing the spread of COVID-19.

Madam President, I am very, very proud of the hon. Sen. Mark, that he had the courage to bring this Motion, because I think it was long overdue and as succinctly articulated by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms: This is our fear. And that is, the suppression of human rights. And for this I fully support the Motion brought as I said by the honourable, very honourable, Sen. Mark. We must resist a parallel epidemic of authoritarian and repressive measures following close on the heels of this health epidemic. Hon. Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity, thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**2.50 p.m.**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, may I record and register my sincerest appreciation to all of my colleagues who have spoken in this democratic environment, sharing their thoughts, their views on this Motion,

addressing the whole matter of a resumption of our normal speaking time.

Madam President, the intention was always to ensure that for democracy to truly flourish, in any society, there must be meaningful participation, meaningful consultation and, at the end of the process, arrive or the arrival of some consensus and, particularly when we have to address that fundamental human rights: freedom of expression, freedom of thought and freedom of speech, Madam President. That is why in many countries today, whilst there have been changes to address the emerging pandemic, and we have had hybrid situations emerging, 99 per cent of the countries that we have examined, they have not curtailed speaking time. Yes, they would have reduced maybe the period that debates would occur. Yes, they would have dealt with a hybrid situation, as I outlined earlier, virtually versus plenary, as we are having today, but the right of Members to speak, if there were any curtailment, it arose out of a consensus.

Madam President, as I indicated in my contribution, in Australia, there is an absolute right entrenched in the Standing Orders that any time a government is seeking to reduce members' speaking time, that government moving a Motion must attract an absolute majority in the Parliament. It cannot be simply the Government using its simple majority in an effort to have its way. That is an injustice that we may have to certainly correct when the UNC returns to office. [*Desk thumping*] We need to amend our Standing Orders to ensure that curtailment of speaking rights must never be tampered with in the way that it has been in this period.

And, Madam President, we did not spend any time going to March 2020. We looked at August of 2020 to the present time, and we needed to place some reasonable arguments. We needed to allow the advancement of wisdom in a context in which Government seemed bent on proceeding along a path that

certainly would not have promoted democracy in our country and in this Parliament.

So I would like to, first of all, identify and thank Sen. Vieira. I want to thank Sen. Vieira for affording me the opportunity to jump the queue by allowing me to raise this matter, this Motion, because he had a Motion before mine, but in the interest and in the spirit of democracy, he allowed me to raise this most important matter [*Desk thumping*] and I want to go on record as thanking him for that generous and gracious offer.

Madam President, I too, would like to—before I get into responding to many of the views expressed during this very important debate, may I also join my colleagues in recording our sincerest thanks and appreciation to the Clerks of both Houses, all members of staff of our Parliament, including our police officers, who have been doing yeoman service and, of course, our Presiding Officers. They have all been doing their part in attempting to ensure that we are safe. But, Madam President, in being safe or in attempting to ensure our safety, we have to ensure that we maintain our democracy in this country.

Madam President, the Leader of Government Business, after several efforts—it was not once, it was not twice, it was not even three times—efforts were made by the Opposition to appeal to the Leader of Government Business to avoid such a Motion from coming before this honourable Senate. As Leader of Opposition Business, I sought to persuade the Leader of Government Business that the time had come for us to revisit this imposition, this truncation of our speaking time. But, Madam President, there was no moving. There was no attempt at meeting the Opposition's call for adjustment. The only time, Madam President, that an attempt was made by the Leader of Government Business to treat with this issue is when this Motion was filed. [*Desk thumping*] That was the only moment

that we had the opportunity to reach out and to allow some rational discussion to take place.

But why must the Opposition wait only for the Leader—that is the Leader of Government Business, Madam President—to respond merely because a Motion is before the Parliament? Madam President, I want to agree that when it comes to speaking time, we have to be very careful. And I want to agree with Sen. Varma, who I want to thank for identifying with this Motion.

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, you mean Sen. Deyalsingh?

**Sen. W. Mark:** My error. [*Laughter*] Thank you very much, Madam President. Sen. Varma Deyalsingh. Thank you for guiding me. I want to agree with Sen. Varma Deyalsingh when he said, Madam President, and I wish to quote—and that is the point I kept making to the Leader of Government Business. We live in a capitalist economy. You are doing everything to liberalize the environment. There are consequences, there are costs, but that is the philosophy and policy driving this economy.

Let the marketplace be the area and space, through demand and supply, to regulate the prices. That is what the Government has been proposing and pushing. But when we propose to the Government, let us take that marketplace concept within our Parliament and allow us, as Members of Parliament, to regulate our own speaking time. Do not cut, do not truncate Members' speaking time. We are entitled to 40 minutes; first speaker, 45, depending on the nature of Motion or matter. Let the Members decide, Madam President, if they will talk for 20 minutes. Our colleague—I was going to say Sister Jearlean John, but it is Sen. Jearlean John, she has come here and she has made her contribution. She did not take her entire 30 minutes that she was entitled to, Madam President. She took less than that. And we were arguing with the Leader of Government Business to allow

Members to regulate their own speaking time rather than to have the heavy hand of the Government using its majority in the Parliament to impose its will on the people, on the Members of this Parliament. And this is why I want, Madam President, to refer to a statement made by Sen. Varma Deyalsingh in his contribution and he said and I quote:

“I want to say I support Sen. Mark’s Motion, and I am thinking we should really give it to individual Members the choice to curtail their own time, because we are all adults, we know about the COVID awareness, and I am thinking the responsibility to cut our time should be something that we on our own could have that responsibility and say, listen, I am cutting down on my time, or I am not giving my detail to speak, because it has been already said.”

And, Madam President, that is what we were trying to telegraph to the Government. Let the Members decide. Let the Members regulate their own time. Do not impose your will on the people, on the Senators, on the various Benches. Let the Senators decide if they will speak for 40 minutes, if they will speak for 30 minutes, if they will speak for 20 minutes. That is what a democracy is all about. So, I support the views expressed by Sen. Varma Deyalsingh.

And then when we came to the issue or the contribution of Sen. Vieira, again, he is entitled to 30 minutes. He took less than 10 and he has recorded his views on the matter. Again, Madam President, self-regulation. For me, you know, I like to speak. As Sen. de Freitas recognized belatedly, I am a very great orator. I thank you for recognizing that. [*Desk thumping*] Thank you. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*] And with the years of experience, he says, I am getting better and better. So I am very happy that he has recognized that. So, Madam President, for me, you know I will always take my full time and Members have grown accustomed to Sen.



Mark taking his full time to articulate and to advance his views on behalf of the party that I represent, and through the party, the people.

Madam President, the danger that we face is this—and, through you, Madam President, I want to address the hon. Leader of Government Business. You know, there is a provision in our Constitution that talks about equality of treatment. We are the makers of laws. It was our forefathers who sat in these halls years ago, decades ago and approved first, the '62 Constitution and then later the '76 Constitution. It was the Parliament that approved our Constitutions. So inherent in our Constitution, Madam President, is this section 4 that deals with human rights, fundamental human rights and freedoms. And I would like to draw to the attention of the Leader of Government Business, through your good self, that we need to be careful that we do not reinvent George Orwell's classic novel, *Animal Farm* when Napoleon formulated seven commandments for the animals on the farm, and he came up with the classic one, Madam President:

“All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.”

We cannot have that narrative being replayed in our Senate, by saying some Members are more equal than others. So you give me 45 minutes, you give yourself 45 minutes as the first speaker and you give the Independent Bench 45 minutes, thereafter inequality of treatment comes in. Every Member thereafter is given 30 minutes when the Standing Orders says he is entitled or she is entitled to 40 minutes. That is discrimination that we are practising in this hallowed hall, which is in contravention and in breach of our Constitution that talks about equality of treatment. So I would like the hon. Leader of Government Business to recognize that COVID or no COVID, you cannot overthrow the Constitution. You cannot validate and breach fundamental rights and freedoms. These are entrenched and we have to respect those rights, Madam President. So I think that when we are

going the route that we are going, Madam President, there are some dangers and it is my duty to point out those dangers or danger zones to the Government, to ensure that we correct those areas where there are shortcomings, Madam President.

Madam President, we are dealing with principles; principles. We are lawmakers. We scrutinize legislation, we hold the Executive to account, we supply finance through the budget and we represent people in different ways. And therefore, Madam President, we take the high ground, that is why we have brought this Motion. So when the hon. Vice-President, who is Sen. de Freitas, spent his time, of course, referring to my contribution, which I have no difficulty with—I always say to Sen. de Freitas, his exuberance and youth is to be admired. I always say so. But we have to come down to the brass tacks, and when we are dealing with fundamental principles, including the rights and freedoms, you do not mathematically look at numbers.

You know, Madam President, when I was reading the distinguished Vice-President's contribution to this debate, he spent a little time, very early in his contribution, calculating almost minutely, Madam President—he said Sen. Mark started with Urgent Questions, how many minutes he got? Then he went on to Questions on Notice, how many minutes he got? And then he went on now to a debate, how many minutes he got? He said, you know, in all, Madam President, we have 150 minutes, you know, Sen. Mark took up 63 minutes? [*Laughter*] So what is that about? That is what we are here for. We are here, Madam President, to do the people's work, and we do not calculate that only in the context of the amount of time Sen. Mark would take to speak.

What this Motion is about essentially, Madam President, is to get the Government to revert back to our Standing Orders; our Standing Orders. We want to uphold our Standing Orders and the Standing Orders say what we are entitled to

as Members of this Senate as it relates to speaking time. And if the Government, Madam President, wishes to amend the Standing Orders to reduce our time, then there is a Standing Orders Committee of which you are the Chairman, and then the Minister or the Government will advance their views as to what is the justification for wanting to have our Senators speak almost for an entire year, Madam President, for 20 minutes. And then, belatedly, when the Motion comes and we are about to the debate it, the hon. Leader of Government Business seeks to increase it to 30 minutes and 45 for first speakers.

So, Madam President, you know, my colleague, Sen. de Freitas, you know, in a very dismissive way, using phrases that sometimes I wonder if it is parliamentary, you know, but you are the Vice-President at times, you sit there in that Chair and you do not refer—

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, please address me and not the Vice-President.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Yes, Madam. Yeah. I am referring to Sen. de Freitas in this instance, through you. You do not refer to people's contribution as playing smart with foolishness. I think that is insulting. I think that is disrespectful. I do not see anyone's contribution here as playing smart with foolishness. That kind of conduct is not for Sen. de Freitas. No, because you sit in a Chair.

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, you are now making your contribution about the Senator. I will ask you to—

**Sen. W. Mark:** Move on?

**Madam President:** Yes. You know what to do.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Okay. Madam President, so we are dealing with scrutiny of complex legislation and scrutinizing complex—you see, the Government, Madam President, I could understand why the Government has no problem with 10 minutes. They do not speak. The Government does not speak in debates, many of

them. Madam President, you remember there was a chap from Nariva? I think it was—I forget his name. They call him—he was a silencer, never used to speak. So when we come here as Members of the Opposition, Madam President—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Madam President, when we come here as Members of the Opposition—I thought I am entitled to 40 minutes in winding up? I am only entitled to 30 minutes?

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, you are entitled to 30 minutes.

**Sen. W. Mark:** Oh, 30. Oh, Madam President, I am shocked. I thought that we were at 40 minutes in winding up. Okay.

But, Madam President, I wanted to look individually at the contribution of the Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries; also, the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries—I have remarks. Dr. Amery Browne, my good friend from Brazil, who has now arrived here on the compound of this place and, you know, he made some very interesting observations in his contribution. Sometimes I ask myself if there is a competition between the former Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs, Dennis Moses and our new Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs. Who is going to win? I am not too sure. Because they are breasting the tape together. When you look at his contribution, you would not believe this is coming from a distinguished doctor. It is very weak, at times, incoherent, but that is what passes for our colleagues here, but that is what life is about, Madam President. I do not have the time to dismantle and completely crush some of these arguments that are just not making sense whatsoever.

Madam President, you said that I only have a few moments again, I only have 30 minutes—I had 30 minutes rather. I am down to maybe three by now. Madam President, I just want to indicate that we, in the United National Congress,

defend and will continue to defend our democracy, and all the freedoms and rights enshrined under sections 4 and 5. I do not think any Government should be using COVID-19 as a cover to establish a dictatorship in our country. And therefore, Madam President, I always warn that it is small steps like these, when you begin to curtail the rights of Members to speak using a pandemic as an excuse, Madam President. These are dangerous signs for any democracy. And therefore, Madam President, I want to warn this Government, do not continue along this path that you have begun. Revert to our full speaking time. Allow the Members to self-regulate.

We are an independent Chamber of the other. We should not be taking instructions from any other Chamber in doing our work and carrying out our duties and responsibilities. We do what is best and what is right and what is proper, as we see fit in our Chamber. And therefore, Madam President, I think it is fitting that the Government reverts, reinstate our full speaking time as this Motion is seeking to establish.

And, Madam President, just let me say, as I bring my contribution to a close, I would like it to be:

*Resolved* that the Senate revert to the speaking time as set out in our Standing Orders with immediate effect. [*Desk thumping*]

I would like the Government, if it is truly interested in our democracy to support this Motion. Let us revert to our speaking time and, Madam President, let us self-regulate our contributions in this honourable Senate. I beg to move, Madam President. [*Desk thumping*]

**3.20 p.m.**

**Sen. Mitchell:** Madam President, I seek your leave in accordance with Standing Order 44(2) to respond and conclude this debate, please?

**Madam President:** Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. [*Desk thumping*]

**The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell):** Madam President, thank you for first recognizing me. Madam President, I was in two minds whether or not to contribute to this debate today because, Madam President, respectfully I saw this debate not as moot, because moot means debatable, but I saw this debate, this Motion as otiose, serving really no purpose having regard to the Motion to adjust the time by Sen. Franklin Khan. [*Desk thumping*] But, Madam President, I had to rise to speak to respond to a few matters here that were put on the record and I can start with Sen. Lyder. Madam President, in responding to this Motion, Sen. Lyder sought to argue that it was somehow a bad thing that no members of staff in this Parliament contracted COVID. Madam President, that is a good thing, and I wish to commend the Presiding Officers, the Clerk and all the members of staff here in the Parliament [*Desk thumping*] for ensuring that. Sen. Lyder also argued repeatedly if he had an extra 10 minutes—if he had an extra 10 minutes he could do this or he could do that, but Sen. Lyder by his own record in this Chamber, “If you have extra 10 minutes you will be repeatedly warned for irrelevance of tedious repetition.” That is your record.

Madam President, I also would like to put on the record on behalf of the Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs that having been appointed Minister, the very first diplomat that the Minister met, and he indicated it in his budget contribution—the very first diplomat that he met was the High Commissioner for India, and that is a reflection of the very close bond and ties that Trinidad and Tobago and India enjoy. [*Desk thumping*] So, Madam President, the statement alone is an abuse of speaking time because you use your speaking time to utter sheer mendacity. Sen. Lyder in his contribution also argued that we were kept here late at night on occasions in December and other occasions; we were kept here late

at night but, Sen. Lyder, you are agreeing with us. What you are actually arguing is there is no curtailment or no limitation on legislative scrutiny here in this Parliament if we are here until the late hours of the night debating legislation.

Madam President, let me for the moment make a few comments on the recitals having looked at the Motion. So the resolution as repeated by Sen. Mark just now:

*“Be it revolved that the Senate revert to the speaking time as set out in the Standing Orders with immediate effect.”*

Fine. But of course, Madam President, when you look at the recitals, recitals that are supposed to give the foundation, the background, the explanation and the reasons for the Motion, the reasons for the resolution—I may be wrong, but, Sen. Mark, through you, Madam President, the fourth recital, the third and the fourth recitals are completely paradoxical. And I am giving you the benefit of the doubt because it could also be oxymoronic.

Madam President, Sen. Mark is saying that the business of Parliament should adapt to the new normal by going back to the old normal? Madam President, the phrase “new normal” is used to indicate a new way of living, a new way of interacting having regard to our surrounding circumstances, that is the COVID-19 pandemic. So when we speak about the “new normal” we are speaking about sanitizing. We are speaking about increased personal hygiene. We are speaking about the washing of hands, the wearing of masks, physically distancing and limiting gathering. So I am not sure exactly, in his recital, what Sen. Mark meant, if he meant that now this is now normal and we should go to a new normal by going back to the old normal. I am really not sure, it is confusing.

So, Madam President, this Motion, what the Motion is actually asking us to do effectively is to increase the cap on debates, on Motions and public Bills;

increase the cap by four and a half hours because now with this limitation in place it is decreased by four and a half hours, and we do that by adding back 10 minutes to Members' speaking times; 10 minutes to Members who are not the mover or the first responder. Madam President, I will reflect on the contribution of Sen. Nakhid because in my respectful view Sen. Nakhid's contribution was one of the better ones on the Opposition side. Sen. Nakhid, of course, spoke in support of his colleague's Motion, but Sen. Nakhid in speaking on his colleague's Motion demonstrated why our focus should be on the quality and the substance of the debate and not on the length of the debate. Sen. John did that too as well.

So Sen. Nakhid used just five to 10 minutes of his contribution to argue his points effectively and he made three points. The first point was the PNM was thwarting democracy. The second point is—and Sen. Lyder repeated it as well—the second point is that there is no medical science, there is no reason to curtail the speaking time from what is provided for in the Standing Orders to what this Senate moved and resolved to curtail it to. And the third point was, well if there is any medical science, nobody in this debate told him what that was. So fair enough, Madam President, five to 10 minutes, he made three points; those were the three points that he had and he prosecuted them to the best of his ability and that was that. Madam President, of course, do we agree with him, absolutely not. We feel that he is absolutely wrong but he made his points effectively in the five or 10 minutes allotted to him.

Madam President, I would like, through you, to remind Sen. Mark and hon. Members here in this Senate that every decision made here in this Senate is made in accordance with some rule that traces back its authority to the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. [*Desk thumping*] Members come here to represent, of course, the views of citizens and Members are here to scrutinize



Government policy, scrutinize Government administration and essentially hold Government to account. Sen. de Freitas stated it very, very clearly, pellucidly clear in his contribution, absolutely no changes were made to the mechanisms here that allow this Senate, Members opposite to hold the Government to account. No changes were made to Urgent Questions. Sen. Mark often moves to ask his urgent questions—all Members in here can ask their urgent questions—no amendments, no modifications to that Standing Order. Questions on Notice, Madam President, oftentimes we see Sen. Mark, a barrage of questions come in and Sen. Mark is the asker of 90 per cent of them. Nothing is wrong with that, this is what he is there to do, but the point is that Government made no move to amend those Standing Orders. You are still allowed to hold Government's action to account.

Motions on the matter of the adjournment, the Members are allowed to file their Motions and Government Ministers must come here to answer and be held to account for all matters on the Motion of the adjournment, all, and we have done that. We have not hid—we have done that on every single occasion. Committee meetings are still held and are held, albeit, virtually but committee meetings are still held, joint select committee meetings, holding every aspect of Government's action, Government's administration, Government's spending to account. So, Madam President, there were no restrictions there. Is that fascism? Is that reminiscent of Hitler or Stalin or slavery as Sen. Mark often likes to allege in this place? And, Sen. Mark, I will say this to you, through you, Madam President, that you are really denigrating the people who have actually had to live through those regimes by coming here and making a mockery of those things. [*Desk thumping*]

So, Madam President, the curtailment was only on the speaking time, as I said, with respect to public Bills and Motions and there is a scientific basis for that, no Member on this side feels that it is necessary to explain to Members opposite,

Sen. Lyder, Sen. Roberts, Sen. Nakhid, the reasons. For the past 12 months now we have been bombarded with health advice from the scientific experts, from the medical experts. They are telling us that this disease spreads from person to person. It is contracted through your mouth, nose, eyes and it is made possible through physical contact, through proximity and less than ideal hygiene. That is what the medical experts have been telling us for the last 12 months, so I do not think anybody in here had to specifically explain that to hon. Members opposite.

We are told, and as a part of our public health response to the disease is to limit gatherings and to physically distance. We need to wear masks. We need to wash our hands. We need to sanitize often. And this Parliament to its credit, through the Presiding Officers who have the general direction and control of this Parliament quickly adapted and adopted to the new normal in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. So on entering the Parliament here, through the Presiding Officers, through the Clerk, Members have to wear their masks, Members have to sanitize, physical distancing in this Chamber is put into effect, and of course the numbers initially were limited but of course we reverted when the risk was a little less, all in a response to a disease.

Madam President, implied in the limit to gatherings is the restriction on the number of people that are allowed to gather as well as a restriction on the time that Members can gather and that goes to the heart of why this curtailment was necessary. It is not to curtail anybody's freedom or rights or individual or anything, it is to protect persons. Madam President, it is true that the Government has control of the Houses of Parliament and it is also true that the Government in this place, led by the Leader of Government Business, has a duty to ensure the safety of Members in this place and that is why the decision was made. We had to reduce the risk of the spread of COVID by limiting the times that we gather here in

plenary sessions. We had that responsibility.

Sen. Khan to his credit, he stood up and he moved the Motion having that responsibility and that duty. That could not be done by the Presiding Officers. We had to move a Motion in here to suspend the Standing Orders for the protection of all Members inside of here. And that is why Sen. Lyder could ask that question now, “Buh how come nobody in de Parliament geh COVID?” It is because of the mechanisms and the restrictions and the limitations that were put in place. [Crosstalk] You are welcome.

**Sen. Lyder:** Anybody get tested?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** So, Madam President—

**Madam President:** Could you please—just a second, Minister. Could Members please desist, once again, from the crosstalk?

**Sen. The Hon. R. Mitchell:** Thank you. So Sen. Khan as the Leader in this place, he had that awesome duty and that awesome responsibility, a real responsibility. We cannot be irresponsible to go outside there and say, “Sunlight does kill COVID and we guh put ah dome over Trinidad and Tobago.” We had to act upon the real science and put mechanisms in place. [Desk thumping] And the Government and the Parliament, Madam President, has led by example in putting in place the restrictions and the limitations to limit the spread of the COVID-19.

So Members speak about, “Well, okay, how come Sen. Mark got up just before the Motion to adjust the speaking time?”, but Sen. Khan had spoken to Sen. Mark and the other coordinator indicating that we are considering it and what exactly is under consideration? The consideration was understanding that there is still a risk of transmission, understanding that there is still a risk that there can be a spike and an increase in the infection rates and resulting death to our vulnerable citizens. We took your concerns on board through Sen. Khan because also

balanced with that we had to consider the importance of allowing more time for the scrutiny of legislation and Motions in this place.

So it is not that the risk is not there, this is just that we have accepted a little more risk to the spread of the COVID-19 disease and allow you a little extra time. We also accepted a little more risk in here during the budget debate because the budget debate—the debate on the Appropriation Bill is one of the most important Bills in this place. So we accepted the risk. It is logic, it is not vaille-que-vaille. And, Madam President, you know, God forbid that any outbreak or anyone gets infected here, Sen. Mark would be the first one to submit a Motion condemning the Government for allowing a spike or infection in this House of Parliament, you know, because we have control over it. And the risk is present, Madam President. I do not know if anybody in here noticed but in the other place recently—I think it was in February—a Motion of no confidence was moved in the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and the person who moved that Motion was the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre, and while the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre was moving that Motion, I, looking at it on YouTube, I looked on in absolute fright as other Members looked on in, and it was not because he said anything significant. The Motion was roundly defeated in no time but, Madam President, the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre while piloting the Motion exhibited signs, full-blown flu-like symptoms while piloting the Bill. Every five minutes he had to wipe his nose.

Members even raised objections on that point. Persons on YouTube were commenting, “Well, if the medical advice is to stay home if you are feeling unwell, why did you come to the Parliament?”, but Sen. Mark says, “We is big man and big women in here”—as my son says, “Big man ting, big woman ting”—and asking for self-regulation when that Member did not self-regulate and did not stay home. But thankfully because of the mechanisms put in place by the Presiding

Officers and the mechanisms put in place with the curtailment of speaking time, perhaps those were the reasons why nobody else in that Chamber was infected on that day. Madam President, this COVID-19 thing is no respecter of political systems, is no respecter of parties, is no respecter of country, race, creed or class. COVID-19 “doh” respect Sen. Khan, it “doh” respect Sen. Wade Mark; COVID-19 does not respect Sen. Roberts, nobody in here. The public health advice in simple, the more we gather, the longer we gather, the greater the risk of spreading COVID-19.

Sen. Mark took us around the Commonwealth, and other Senators did that too to see what other parliaments are doing to amplify his point. Sen. Lyder spent a considerable amount of time with the UK Parliament, but I will not be baited into debating what other parliaments are doing, because you know why, Madam President, the truth is parliaments are controlled by Governments and all across the world that principle is the same, Commonwealth or otherwise. And governments across the world have put in their own version of response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Sen. Lyder, through you, Madam President, the British government also put in a response in the Parliament as well as in the country. Some Governments have put in stricter measures upfront, some have not been so strict, and in some countries right now unprecedented levels of COVID-19 infection rates and spikes. In the UK, through you Madam President, Sen. Lyder, in the UK unprecedented levels.

Just recently in Jamaica they had to issue a whole wave of new restrictions and limitations. You are talking about, Madam President, Sen. Lyder is talking about going to the beach and eating curry duck, in Jamaica you cannot leave your house on a weekend, you cannot. So, Madam President, on that basis allow me to thank the hon. Prime Minister, to thank the Minister of Health; [*Desk thumping*] to

thank all the public health officials, all persons in the public health area, in the hospitals, et cetera, Madam President, to thank you, to thank everyone inside of here for keeping our levels down. And even now we are hearing about some spikes in the Caroni area and it is now spreading so we have to be even more vigilant. Now is not the time for complacency, now is the time for the public sector, for business, for the Parliament, for the Executive, everyone to work together and to be on the same page.

So, Madam President—well let me touch on what Sen Dr. Dillon-Remy said, and I thank the hon. Senator for bringing the article on ParlAmericas with respect to the recommendations on what Houses of Parliament should be doing. Sen. Mark may have missed that. I know Sen. Mark must have been on countless conferences with ParlAmericas so I am not sure why he missed it, but I thank you, hon. Sen. Dr. Dillon-Remy, for bringing that to our attention. But, of course, I am sure when you examine the time when it was brought and the time when we put our measures in place, it was after. The ParlAmericas' article would have been after. And it may very well have been that the ParlAmericas looked at what our Parliament did and said, “Okay, we can recommend that to other parliaments because the Trinidad and Tobago Parliament has responded quickly, efficiently, effectively to protect its Members and the work that we do here in furthering democracy.”

So, Madam President, in conclusion let me say outright that I reject this Motion out of hand, and further I just want to say one thing with respect to what Sen. Mark continually laments. We always hear in this Parliament, “We must respect the rights of the minority, we must respect the views of the minority, we must respect the rights and views of the minority”. Opposition Members are now starting to argue that it is almost a bad thing to bring legislation requiring a special

majority; it is a bad thing for us having control of this House. Madam President, while hon. Members opposite continue to call and ask for the respect of the minority and respect for the views and rights of the minority, I want hon. Members—and I ask very respectfully that hon. Members also consider at the same time, a respect for the rights and the views of the majority, because we in here, we did not go anywhere and just pick up the majority and come. The majority was placed upon us by the majority of people in society who elected us [*Desk thumping*] for our policies and to control these Houses of Parliament. They did that in 2020; they continue to be happy with the results. Madam President, I thank you for allowing me this opportunity to make these few comments. Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question put.*

**3.50 p.m.**

**Sen. Mark:** Division.

*The Senate divided:* Ayes      10    Noes      19

AYES

Mark, W.

John, Ms. J.

Lutchmedial, Ms. J.

Lyder, D.

Roberts, A.

Richards, P.

Vieira, A.

Deyalsingh, Dr. V.

Seepersad, Ms. C.

Nakhid, D.

## NOES

Khan, Hon. F.

Gopee-Scoon, Hon. P.

Rambharat, Hon. C.

Sinanan, Hon. R.

Hosein, Hon. K.

West, Hon. A.

Browne, Hon. Dr. A.

Mitchell, Hon. R.

de Freitas, N.

Cox, Hon. D.

Singh, Hon. A.

Sagramsingh-Sooklal, Hon. R.

Bacchus, Hon. H.

Lezama-Lee Sing, Mrs. L.

Bethelmy, Ms. Y.

Teemal, D.

Thompson-Ahye, Mrs. H.

Dillon-Remy, Dr. M.

Welch, E.

*Motion negatived.*

**GOVERNMENT'S DEBT SERVICING OBLIGATIONS****(PLANS/PROGRAMMES TO FULFIL)**

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you, Madam President. I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

*Whereas* it is recognized that rising levels of domestic and foreign debt may



negatively impact this country's socio-economic development;

*And whereas* it is recognized that because of Government's policies, the working population has been experiencing the effects of these rising debt levels;

*And whereas* international credit rating agencies have cautioned about Trinidad and Tobago's future borrowings, given the economic constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic; *Be it resolved* that the Government reconsider its borrowing policy in light of this country's rising Debt-to-GDP ratio and the possible negative impact of same on the country's socio-economic development;

*And be it further resolved* that this Senate call on the Government to outline specific plans and programmes in respect of fulfilling its debt servicing obligations, in light of the economic constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Madam President, the national economy is at risk of an explosive financial crisis, given the unparalleled and exponential surge and growth in public debt levels, both during and the many years leading into the COVID-19 pandemic. As such, if immediate and positive measures are not taken soonest, if not now, this country could sink into what has been popularly referred to as the virtual debt trap.

Madam President, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020, the debt to GDP ratio in this country stood at some 78.8 per cent. Now, given the level of borrowings in and during the pandemic, the debt to GDP ratio has risen close to 82.9 per cent or 83 per cent. In fact, looking at the Central Bank data, it is now indicating that we could be rushing towards 90 per cent of debt to GDP in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam President, if we stick to the 82.9 per cent or thereabouts, at the end of fiscal 2020, which would be September 30<sup>th</sup>, we are talking about

roughly a 33 per cent increase in this country's debt, during the last six months.

Now, Madam President, an analysis of the revenue to debt ratio is also disturbing. We need, as a country, to generate revenues in order to pay our debt. When we talk about public debt, I will demonstrate we are not only talking about domestic debt, but we are also talking about foreign or external debt. So in 2015, 74 per cent of our debt could have covered fiscal revenues—that was in 2015. Madam President, by 2017, this value fell to 38.6 per cent, and by 2020, this value stood at a meagre 28.1 per cent, meaning that only 28.1 per cent of our country's debt could be met by the revenues earned in that year. Now this is very dangerous business, Madam President. Because what this highlights is our inability to pay our debt. It shows that there is growing distress and a certain level of discomfort, given the rise in our public debt in this country.

Madam President, the rising and uncontrollable budget deficit, coupled with the worsening balance of payments, deficits of over US \$4.57 billion, over the period 2015 to 2019, featured prominently in this country's rising debt. So what we are seeing is that the revenue that the country is generating to service its mounting foreign debt is decreasing and not increasing.

What is deeply alarming and profoundly disturbing is where borrowed moneys or funds are being utilized unproductively, meaning, when we borrow money it is not to invest in productive activities. The Government is borrowing and utilizing moneys unproductively, meaning, moneys are being borrowed to meet merely recurrent expenditure, like paying salaries and meeting wages. Madam President, this is really a recipe for a monumental economic disaster that clearly is not sustainable.

Borrowed funds must never be used to finance and fund—or I should put it another way, Madam President. Borrowed funds must always be used to finance

and fund productive activity, aimed at developing and expanding production or productive capacity in anyone's country.

Madam President, it is estimated that at the current rate of debt to GDP and the negative economic growth generated therein, this country could easily cross 90 per cent of debt to GDP, since taxes on income and profits continue to be very sparse, and there is no noteworthy investment projects on the horizon aimed at providing greater economic streams for the State, in terms of revenues, be it foreign, US, or be it domestic revenues.

Madam President, the net public sector debt of this country rose from 35 per cent in 2010 to 48.2 per cent in 2015. According to the Central Bank, at the end of September, thereabouts, of 2020, this country was reading close to 82.7 per cent. That is why I indicated earlier that the latest Central Bank data revealed that at the end of January/February of this year, Trinidad and Tobago could be in the vicinity of 90 per cent of debt to GDP.

Madam President, another disturbing feature of this country's public debt, especially its foreign component, is that our economy seems to be coming very much too debt reliant on the Chinese economy. So in US dollars terms, Trinidad and Tobago's external debt in 2010, stood at US 1.538 billion, and by the end of 2020, this external debt, in US dollars, rose to some \$4.697 billion.

So what we are seeing and—in fact, I would like this honourable Senate to note that US 986.9 million of our economy's external debt was held in US dollars. US \$131.1 million worth of our external debt was denominated in the Chinese currency in 2010, and a further 100 million of our external debt in 2010 was in Japanese yen. Madam President, in terms of US dollars, 60.5 million in Australian dollars. So what we are seeing is that our external debt has climbed to, as I said, US \$4.69 billion of which—in terms of our commitment to these external agencies

and countries—seems to be becoming very uncomfortable.

Madam President, it is also necessary for us to look at what is happening with our capital expenditure, in the context of this rising public debt. What is taking place is that there appears to be—in 2008, our capital expenditure stood at about close to \$9 billion, but by 2020, after some five years of negative economic growth in our economy, capital injection into our economy has literally collapsed.

What is extremely worrying is the increase in interest payments to service our growing national debt. Madam President, rising debt in our country, along with rising interest rate payments to service those debts, is allowing a situation to develop where less and less moneys are going toward basic and essential goods and services for our country, whether it is in the area of health care, in education, in food production, in marine life, in the environment, as examples; whether it has to do with children not being able to have the laptops necessary for online training in terms of schooling.

What we are seeing taking place, because of the mismanagement, because of the incompetence, because of the corruption by this Government, [*Desk thumping*] what we are witnessing is a larger and larger slice of our scarce resources going toward the servicing of interest payments. Madam President, interest payments in this country increased in 2012 when it stood at 2.74 billion. That was our interest payment at the end of fiscal 2012. This has now risen to 4.615 billion as at the end of fiscal 2020, representing a 68.4 per cent increase in interest payments. Madam President, this is alarming.

This is cause for great concern in this country when such a large chunk of our revenues, that ought to be going to provide our children with laptops, to buy, for instance, the appropriate pharmaceuticals products—Madam President, would you believe, if what we are reading in the newspapers and statements being made

by Ansa McAL, that this Government could not find US \$8.4 million to purchase an order of 351,000 doses of vaccines from Pfizer, and they had to go cap in hand, begging to get that money? It tells you that the Government, even though they have been drawing down from our Heritage and Stabilisation Fund for the last few months, this Government has drawn down close to TT \$6.3 billion, but they could not find US \$8.4 million to purchase 351,000 doses of Pfizer vaccines. And there is confusion raging in our country today because of this Government's incompetence and mismanagement of our resources, and leaving our children and our citizens completely exposed to the possibility of—now we are hearing there is an increase in the spread of this dangerous disease and virus called COVID-19. [*Desk thumping*]

What is even more alarming is that when you allocate more and more interest payments to service our debt obligations, it stifles economic growth. The potential for expansion of growth in our economy is stifled as a result of higher interest payments. As I said, when you combine this with what is going on with expenditure in capital programmes and interest payments in 2020, what we are seeing is 53 per cent went towards paying interest in this country—towards paying, rather, our public debt.

Madam President, it is said that whenever a country's interest payments exceed its capital injection, that country's productive capacity is severely compromised, and that is what is happening in our country today.

It is to be noted that when it comes to our external debt, we owe a lot of moneys to multinational entities. We also know that the Government has gone on the international capital market to raise bonds in order to—well, of course, to borrow and to finance their internal operations. Those US dollars that they have raised have been used to bolster the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund artificially.

So, Madam President, when we look at the external debt, we are seeing where the international capital market is playing a very big role in the accumulation of our external debt. Sometime ago, the Government went on the international market and it raised almost US \$1 billion in—via bonds. We also know that the Government has been borrowing very heavily from the CAF Development Bank of Latin America. We have estimated that the Government has borrowed close to US \$700 million from CAF thus far.

Madam President, as we look at this rising public debt, which stands—the total is close to \$122 billion, all told, in Trinidad and Tobago currency, we have to pay attention to another very dangerous phenomenon, that is, contingent liabilities. This concept and component of our rising domestic debt is cause for worry.

Madam President, contingent liability, how is this manifested? This is manifested in letters of comfort or government guarantees to state-owned enterprises to facilitate borrowings. Contingent liabilities in this country increased from around \$22 billion in 2010, to some 32.8 billion by the end of fiscal 2020. The leading state-owned enterprises engaged in ramping up this nation's contingency liabilities include the following entities. You know, we were once told that when the Government, because they wanted to hide the fake oil scandal, locked down and shut down and destroyed Petrotrin, and they created something called Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited, we were told that when they went on the international bond market to refinance the so-called US \$850 million, which was inherited, which was caused, which was supervised by the PNM, when one Malcolm Jones, who is now dead, may his soul rest in peace, contracted that amount, and through what? Something called the World GTL plant, which they sold for a song and a dance to a chap called Ainsley Gill, US \$25 million, 10 million in cash—we do not know if that was ever paid—and \$15 million in

preference shares.

**4.20 p.m.**

That is how that US \$850 million debt came, Madam President. So they went on the international market, through what is called Trinidad Petroleum Holdings, to refinance. You know, we are now seeing in the books of Trinidad and Tobago under contingency liabilities, a debt amounting to \$1.3 billion accumulated by Trinidad Petroleum Holdings Limited. So we have guaranteed through a letter of comfort, Madam President, or through a government guarantee of \$1.3 billion floated on the international market to refinance the US \$850 million that the Government said they raised some time ago in 2019.

Another state enterprise that is loose and is only accumulating, Madam President, a lot of contingent liabilities which the Prime Minister took away from the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development and placed it under the Office of the Prime Minister when some controversy arose with a loan involving NCB Global Finance, Madam President. This Urban Development Company of T&T has accumulated a debt under contingency liability of \$1 billion. So you have the Urban Development Company of T&T owing \$1 billion and the Government has guaranteed that through letters of comfort and the government guarantees.

And there is another loose, rogue company on the loose in this country. It is called NIDCO. They built a highway to nowhere in the forest, Madam President. I do not even know who is going to drive into the Cumuto forest on this road that will eventually cost the country close to \$200 million. Madam President, I am seeing under the contingent liabilities, that company, Madam President, is owing or has debt of close to \$900 million, Madam President.

So, Madam President, this is what we are faced with. A Government that has mismanaged this economy, they have used COVID as a cover in order to hide their

incompetence, mismanagement, corruption, nepotism, Madam President, and we the citizens of this country have to end up paying a hefty price, Madam President, for this.

Madam President, I want to tell you what each of us in this country has to pay as a result of this accumulated and rising national debt. And I hear the Minister of Finance who is here, I am glad to see him, always making comparison with India and England and the United States. Those countries have their own currencies. The United Kingdom has their own currency called the pound. The United States has their own currency called the US dollar. They can print, we cannot.

Madam President, you know what is being done right now? In 2010, debt per capita in US dollars and, Madam President, we are talking about debt per individual, man, woman and child. What happened in 2010? Our debt per capita was \$36,502.80. Madam President, at the end of 2015 we went to \$58,230.70, and by the end of 2020 September, and that is September eh, Madam President, we are now \$73,940 per individual, man, woman and child. By now, Madam President, the rate at which this Government is borrowing moneys, I would not be surprised if this 73,940 has now ramped up to close to 90,000 per man, woman and child. That is the state of play in our country today.

According to the Central Bank data centre, gross public sector debt to GDP has reached 90.6 per cent as at the end of fiscal 2020. That is coming from the Central Bank data centre.

So, Madam President, what is happening is that because of the mismanagement in our country, this Government has been rising or allowing the budget deficit to rise and to rise and to rise, and as the budget deficit rises, Madam President, we are borrowing and borrowing and borrowing and therefore Trinidad



and Tobago continues to develop a huge and mounting foreign debt.

Madam President, when the United National Congress and the People's Partnership left Government in September of 2015, we left US \$10.5 billion in the foreign exchange reserves. That was the official exchange reserves, Madam President, which allowed cover of one year's import or 12 months. That was at the end of September 2015.

Madam President, as we speak at the end of January 2021 we are down to US \$6.9 billion or less than eight and a half months of import cover. Unemployment and unemployment levels have continued to rise, Madam President. We have estimated that over 120,000 people are on the breadline as we speak. And, Madam President, the Government has hidden, the Government has not facilitated the production of data on unemployment and underemployment, so we cannot tell you and this honourable Senate exactly what is the current data for unemployment in Trinidad and Tobago. The last data we have had, Madam President, is data for two years ago. Two years ago, that is the last time we have been able to get data.

Madam President, in the meantime you have hundreds of small and medium-sized businesses under a lot of pressure, many of them closing down. So small businesses are being hampered and are being affected. Medium-sized businesses are being challenged and they are going under, and even large enterprises, Madam President, are feeling the pinch. And you know why, Madam President? We have had a Minister of Trade and Industry who has been unable to deal with the ease of doing business in our country. The ease of doing business, Madam President, attracts foreign investment and it encourages local entrepreneurship. Since leaving office—we left in 2014 Trinidad and Tobago at number 66, Madam President, out of close to 193 countries in the world in the ease

of doing business which is very important to restart our economy and to give business that push, Madam President. Madam President, you know where we are at the end of 2019/2020?—at 105. The Minister of Trade and Industry has done nothing to ease this particular index, that is, the ease of doing business.

Madam President, what has also happened is that the Index of Economic Freedom has also collapsed from 67, we were at 67 in 2015, we are now at 109, Madam President. Madam President, there is a concept called the Commercial Banks Average Excess Reserves, and based on data we have established, at the end of January of 2020, that Commercial Banks Average Excess Reserves stood at \$11.5 billion. Madam President, more than double what it was in January of 2020. So we have \$11.5 billion in the Commercial Banks Average Excess Reserves, yet still, Madam President, investment is down in our country. Why are investors not investing? Why is there not a hunger and a desire, Madam President, for investment in our country? And this is where I talked about, Madam President, the ease of doing business and the failure of the Ministry of Trade and Industry and the Minister of Trade and Industry to deal with this matter of the ease of doing business.

Madam President, international credit-rating agencies are watching us very closely. They are watching, Madam President, to see how we are treating with critical indices in this country. Standard & Poor's as you will recall, Madam President, credit rating for this country, the last one we have is a BB minus with a stable outlook. Whereas Moody's credit rating for this country was last set at BA1 with a negative outlook. Madam President, this is very important when we are talking about the foreign debt and particularly our foreign debt and our ability to service that debt. And when we look at the domestic macro-economic framework, these things featured very prominently in the assessment by these international

credit agencies. And, Madam President, if our outlook continues to be negative and if our credit rating continues to fall, what it means is that the cost of borrowings on the international market would become more expensive as we seek to access those funds out there.

Madam President, research is showing that after a debt to GDP ratio of 90 per cent, if that is breached as we have already breached or about to be breached, that particular ratio—

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

**Sen. W. Mark:**—debt dramatically, Madam President, affects economic growth. And therefore, the International Monetary Fund has stated that debt to GDP ratio of 60 per cent is a practical number that we can look at as it relates to developed countries. And as it relates to developing countries, we should have a debt to GDP ratio of about 40 per cent. What is happening, Madam President, is that we are going in excess of 90 per cent and that, Madam President, is going to negatively impact our economic growth process, and impact several important key factors including public investments, Madam President, and total factor productivity.

Madam President, I would like to say that the Government needs to come clean and the Government needs to provide this country with a clear debt management strategy. Secrecy is not the answer. Transparency is the best disinfectant for secrecy. Let the sun shine, Madam President, on the debt management strategy of this country's situation.

Madam President, that is why in this Motion on the foreign debt we have called on the Government to reconsider its borrowing policy in light of this country's rising debt to GDP ratio. That ratio, Madam President, and the obvious negative impact this is having on our country's socioeconomic development.

Madam President, as I have said we have had almost five years of negative

economic growth. There is contraction in our economy simultaneously with a rise in our debt to GDP ratio which is not healthy for our economy and our country and therefore, we are calling on the Government in this Motion to reconsider its borrowing policy. And, Madam President, we are calling on the Government in this Motion to provide this Senate with specific plans and programmes in respect of fulfilling its debt servicing obligations particularly in light of the economic constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Madam President, we need the Government to provide to this Senate a clear plan and a clear programme in respect of how it is going to fulfil its debt servicing obligations.

Madam President, I am afraid that if the Government continues to dither and continues to not focus attention on this very important matter of providing the Senate with an appropriate plan and programme as it relates to debt services, we are going to be in extreme difficulty in the future.

So, Madam President, this Motion is clear, it is specific, it is calling action on the part of the Government so that we avoid this country dipping and sinking into a debt trap and allowing this country to be swallowed up in the jaws of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, Madam President, its cousin institution. We need to take action now, we cannot continue as we are going. The economy is dead, we need to get the economy growing. We need to grow ourselves out of the debt trap that we are in. We need to recover the \$17 billion that is owed to us by BPTT and Shell that robbed this country as a result of transfer pricing. That money if we had in this country, we would have been able to be better off, Madam President.

Madam President, in those circumstances, I call on the Government to adhere to our resolution in this Motion and present to this Parliament plans and programmes to deal with how we are going to fulfil our debt obligations as we go

forward. Madam President, I beg to move.

**Madam President:** Someone needs to second the Motion.

**Sen. John:** Madam Speaker, I second the Motion and I reserve my right to speak at a later stage.

**Madam President:** The Motion has been seconded by Sen. John.

*Question proposed.*

**Madam President:** Minister of Finance, you have 40 minutes.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Madam President. Madam President, in his contribution Sen. Mark raised a number of issues that have absolutely nothing to do with the Motion, the preamble and the resolutions. This Motion, as I read it, simply refers to the countries debt to GDP ratio and the Government's borrowing policy. It does not refer to COVID-19, it does not refer to the ease of doing business and all of those other things that Sen. Mark introduced into the discussion.

I would not fall into the trap of widening the debate into something that it is not, but I would simply deal with a specific allegation made by Sen. Mark in trying to contextualize his contribution and that was, that the Government did not have money to buy vaccines. Let me state categorically that that is untrue. This Government has allocated and will provide any funding whatsoever required for vaccines as and when it becomes available. That is a commitment we have made in the Ministry of Finance. Whatever the cost is, the Government through the Ministry of Finance will source the funding to procure vaccines. I just want to make that crystal clear.

Sen. Mark also said that our debt has increased by 33 per cent over the last six months. So we are in March, so that would take us back to September, the end of September, I assume. The total net public debt in September 2020 was \$121.45

billion. The total public debt at the end of February was \$124.73 billion. The difference between those two figures, Madam President, is about \$3.3 billion. With our current GDP at about \$150 billion, 3.3 divided by 150 or taken the other way, it means that our debt has increased by about 2 per cent over the last six months, not 33 per cent as Sen. Mark started off his contribution.

Now Sen. Mark would also be grateful if I did not refer to the global situation but, Madam President, he cannot, the hon. Senator cannot have his cake and eat it too. He cannot. The hon. Senator referred to a developed country matrix for debt to GDP and say that we in Trinidad and Tobago must follow and mirror the debt to GDP ratios in the developed world on the one hand, and then on the other hand say that we must not compare ourselves to what is happening in the developed world.

So I wish to put into the record a document, it is the Fiscal Monitor Update of the International Monetary Fund dated January 2021. This is the most recent Fiscal Monitor Update from the International Monetary Fund. The headline is, "Government Support Is Vital as Countries Race to Vaccinate". The sub headline at a glance.

"Global fiscal support of \$14 trillion"—US—"has contributed to saving lives and livelihoods and has mitigated the effects of the pandemic on consumption and output. Together with economic contraction causing lower revenues, such support has led to a rise in public debt and deficits."

And this is one of the problems any country faces, Madam President, and a problem we in Trinidad and Tobago face in particular, because when there is an economic shock such as occurred with COVID-19, the contraction of the economy is inevitable. And since debt to GDP is a ratio of an absolute number, I just called out the numbers there, 121 billion in September, 124 billion at the end of February,

the debt to GDP ratio is an absolute number. It is the ratio of the absolute debt to the GDP. So if the GDP contracts because of an economic shock, then naturally the debt to GDP ratio will increase. And this is what the IMF is saying that:

“Together with the economic contraction causing lower revenues, such support has led to a rise in public debt and deficits.”

The IMF goes on to say:

“Global public debt is estimated to reach 98 percent to GDP at the end of 2020, compared with 84 percent for the same...”—period—“...in October 2019...

Fiscal responses have been shaped by access to financing: overall deficits as a share of the GDP...are projected at -13.3 percent...”—in—“...advanced economies, -10.3 percent for emerging market and middle-income economies, and - 5.7 percent for low-income developing countries.”

So that what this is telling us is that, in 2020 the deficits in the developed world were of the order of 13 per cent, -13 per cent, middle income countries 10.3, and in low income -5.7.

“Fiscal support to vulnerable households and firms needs to be available as appropriate until the recovery is firmly underway.

Fiscal policy should support sustainable recovery and facilitate a transformation to a...digital, and inclusive economy while managing fiscal...risks.”

And I go on.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a severe challenge to public finances. The contraction and output and ensuing fall in revenues along with emergency lifelines such as we have had in Trinidad and Tobago, increased deficits and debts beyond levels recorded during the global financial crisis.

And for hon. Senators that is the crisis of 2008/2009.

“Global fiscal support reached nearly 14 trillion...”—comprising “...7.8 trillion in additional spending...”—or foregone revenues and \$6 trillion in equity injections, loans and guarantees.

So the rest of the world decided that to deal with the pandemic you had to access loan financing, you had to engage in emergency support. This is exactly what we did in Trinidad and Tobago. I would not read the entire fiscal monitor update, but it said, the IMF says that because of the COVID-19 economic shock on the world, the average government gross to GDP ratio could exceed 123 per cent.

In 2020 almost all advanced economies offered large fiscal support to their populations to counter the health crisis and its economic fallout. The estimate of this fiscal support is US \$12 trillion, US \$12,000 billion, or if I put in Trinidad and Tobago dollars, 80,000 billion Trinidad and Tobago dollars.

In the United Kingdom public debt rose by £333 billion, that is 3 trillion Trinidad and Tobago dollars or 3,000 billion Trinidad and Tobago dollars over the 11 months of the financial year to February 2021. Total UK public sector debt now stands at approximately \$2,131 billion or around 97.5 per cent of GDP in the UK, a level not seen in that country since the 1960s. In Germany, in order to ensure or to attempt to have an economic recovery, the Government is targeting €96 billion in additional borrowing which would be 700 billion Trinidad and Tobago dollars in 2021 on top of the €217.8 billion borrowed in 2020. That is Germany.

**4.50 p.m.**

So Germany is borrowing €300 billion. That is an unparalleled socio-economic response by that government. Government debt in China is expected to reach 70 per cent. Brazil's debt to GDP ratio is projected to reach 92 per cent. India's debt to GDP ratio is projected to reach 83 per cent, all in this year, Madam



President. And, Madam President, as we grapple with the shortfall in revenue—because that is a fact, it is not a myth—caused by collapse of commodity prices, lower oil and gas production, supply chain disruptions, Public Health Regulations, and all of the attendant shocks associated with COVID-19, we continue to provide whatever budgetary resources are required to health sector. And I just made the point that the Ministry of Finance is standing in the gap and will provide any finance required for any vaccine that is made available to Trinidad and Tobago; any and all. The issue is obtaining the vaccines. So as soon as the Ministry of Finance receives a firm written delivery commitment from any one of the WHO approved vaccine suppliers, through the Ministry of Health, we will immediately make the funding available. I want to make that crystal clear.

But the Ministry of Finance continues to provide budgetary support to the health sector to hire additional medical personnel; to source medical equipment and PPE; to upgrade hospitals and medical facilities; to commission specific sites dedicated to treating COVID-19 persons—infected persons—and step-down convalescing and quarantine facilities; to purchase vaccines, and to create a parallel health care system, specifically to respond to the pandemic. And all of this, Madam President, is what has allowed us in Trinidad and Tobago to manage the pandemic to the best of our ability.

We are also fully cognizant of the fact that these measures—the measures with respect to public health—have dampened and, in some cases, curtailed completely economic activity, with the most severe impact on some of the country's significant employment creating sectors, such as tourism, hospitality, manufacturing and so on, arts, entertainment and recreation. But in the face of all of that, we have utilized the fiscal space available to us, and access to local and international capital markets to facilitate expenditure towards the maintenance of

socio-economic peace and continuity. Our decisive actions in 2020 have resulted in a viral load that is among the lowest in the world and we are not like some of the developed countries, like Italy, who have to have lockdown, after lockdown, after lockdown, where their health sector is completely under strain.

Trinidad and Tobago's health sector is coping very well with the demands of COVID-19, and we are way beyond many developed countries in the world in terms of the capacity of our health sector to deal with infected persons and our viral load. And all of this is because of the borrowing—because this is the point I am making, Madam President. All of this is because of the borrowing that we undertook in 2020, among other things.

We very prudently utilized a number of concessional fast disbursing facilities provided by various multilateral lending agencies in direct response to the pandemic. These included a contingent credit line from the Andean Development Bank or CAF of US \$50 million and a second contingent credit line from CAF of US 100 million, a US \$100 million facility; all of these things designed specifically by these multilateral lending agencies to deal with the shock of COVID, a US \$100 million facility from the Inter-American Development Bank. We are currently in the final stages of finalizing drawdowns from a World Bank US \$20 million loan, and there are several offers of additional COVID-19 specific financing available from multilateral agencies and also from donor governments.

In all of this, Madam President, I heard Sen. Mark speak about international credit rating agencies and our international reputation. And I wish to point out that in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, right in the middle, in June of 2020, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago was able to maintain an investment grade credit rating with Standard & Poor's, while countries all over the world were losing their ratings. All over the world countries were losing their credit ratings.

We, in Trinidad and Tobago, using expert consultants that we hired out of Europe, using experts within the Ministry of Finance in Trinidad and Tobago, and a lot of hard work on the part of everybody, public servants and so on, we in Trinidad and Tobago maintained our investment grade rating with Standard & Poor's, and also maintained our credit rating with Moody's. That is no small achievement, Madam President. There are very few countries in the world who were able to do that.

And as a result, we were able to go to the international capital market in the middle of COVID and get a US \$500 million, 10-year bond at a very good interest rate of 4.5 per cent. We were able to achieve that in Trinidad and Tobago in the middle of COVID. We were able to get a very good interest rate. That bond issue was oversubscribed by over 100 per cent within two hours. In the height of COVID, where countries all over the world were collapsing and their credit ratings disappearing, we maintained our credit rating and were able to raise US \$500 million. Half of that was used to repay a debt that was maturing and the other half was used to deal with the issues that I have just raised, in terms of propping up and supporting our health sector and also ensuring that we were able to keep people whole and keep people in jobs and pay salaries on time.

This achievement, Madam President—contrary to what Sen. Mark would have us believe—this achievement of raising US \$500 million in two hours, a 10-year facility at 4.5 per cent, and maintaining our credit rating in the middle of COVID, with oil price going to zero, gas production down by 30 per cent, gas price down by 30 per cent, all of that going on, and we were still able to achieve this. This is because contrary to what Sen. Mark would have us believe, Trinidad and Tobago was deemed then and is deemed now to be a viable investment location with adequate fiscal space, sound economic buffers and solid medium-term prospects to successfully navigate the current challenging circumstances.

The international investor community still holds this view, Madam President, the Ministry of Finance continues to be in receipt of a number of unsolicited proposals from several international investment banks indicating that another Trinidad and Tobago approach to the international capital market this year would be very well received, and we can most likely raise financing at the same attractive interest rates and terms, Madam President.

Coming back to the IMF. The IMF has advised policymakers to strike a balance between providing short-term support for solid recovery while keeping debt at manageable and sustainable levels over the medium term. The key message from the Fund has been for countries to develop creditable medium-term fiscal frameworks, together with well-calibrated consolidation strategies, and implement them as soon as the pandemic is over. We are taking this advice on board.

Over the period 2021 to 2023, we are preparing a strategy that would result in a net decrease in our debt to GDP ratio by 2023. Let me just put some information into the system since Sen. Mark does not want me to speak about developed countries whose debt to GDP ratios are now 100 per cent and more.

Let me talk about Caricom countries: Barbados' debt to GDP in 2019/2020 was 126 per cent, it is forecasted to increase to 146 per cent—this is IMF's forecast—by 2020/2021. Jamaica, 2019/2020, 93.5 per cent, forecasted to increase to 97.9 per cent in 2021. St. Vincent and the Grenadines 85.8 per cent, projected to remain stable. St. Lucia projected to increase from 74 per cent to 77.3 per cent. And a lot of these countries, Madam President, have been very fortunate to receive debt relief. So, they have gone to the international community and more or less told the international community that they “cyar” pay their debts. So they have had quite a bit of debt relief, debt write-off, otherwise their debt to GDP ratios would be even higher than that, what I have just expressed, Madam President.

Let me also say that our debt service, as a percentage of GDP in 2021, is projected to be about 6.5 per cent, and we are hoping to get that down to 5.6 per cent by 2022 and thereafter. Our debt strategy has a number of objectives to minimize the country's cost of funding, consistent with a prudent degree of risk. There are opportunities at this point in time. That refinanced US 500 million component—the 250 million out of the US 500 million was to refinance existing debt. We were able, Madam President, as I said—I want to repeat in the middle of COVID—to retire that 250 million debt and refinance it, and reduce the interest rate on that debt by almost 50 per cent. The interest rate on that 250 million US that was maturing last year was close to 9 per cent. We were able to reduce to 4½ per cent, Madam President, thus reducing our debt burden significantly, saving this country hundreds of millions of dollars in interest payments. [*Desk thumping*]

So part of our debt strategy, as we have opportunities at this time because of low interest rates prevailing in the world, is to look at all our debt instruments that we can refinance. Some of them are not so simple. When you issue a bond on the local market, for example, and you have hundreds or thousands of investors in the bond instrument. It is not so simple to go to them and seek refinancing. What you have to do is to borrow again and pay them off. Some of them—one-on-one unilateral arrangements with banks and so on—you can speak to the banks and refinance and so on. So, we are adopting a series of different strategies, Madam President, to refinance all high-cost debt as we go forward, which should reduce our debt service obligations significantly.

We are looking at state enterprises and statutory authority debts. We are prioritizing, as far as is practical and as possible, concessional financing from multilateral financial institutions, like CAF, like IDB, because the funding that comes from these multilateral financial institutions has grace periods, long tenors,

stretched out repayment periods and lower interest rates. So again, it is an opportunity. One has to be always mindful that you do not allow your external debt to GDP ratio to get out of whack, so you have to keep your eyes on that. But once there are opportunities to borrow from multilateral institutions with long tenors, grace periods, moratoriums, low interest rates, it is something we in the Ministry of Finance will keep under constant review.

There is an effort on the part of the Government to restructure state-owned enterprises and statutory authorities to reduce their dependence on government guaranteed financing. And I just want to correct another bit of misinformation put into the system by Sen. Mark. By the way, Madam President, how much more time do I have?

**Madam President:** You finish at 5.18.

**Hon. C. Imbert:** Okay, so I have 13 minutes. Thank you. Just want to correct more misinformation put into the system by Sen. Mark. The refinancing done by Trinidad Petroleum Holdings of the bond that had been taken out by Petrotrin—the US 850 million loan facility taken out by Petrotrin that matured in August of 2019—the refinancing of that loan was done by Trinidad Petroleum without a government guarantee. That has been stated in the public domain on countless occasions, and I have congratulated the persons who worked so diligently on that facility for the fact that it did not increase the public debt; did not. There is no government guarantee on that Petrotrin TPHL financing. I have said it over and over, and I will say it again, and I will congratulate those persons who worked on that loan financing again, because they were able to do it without a government guarantee. A fantastic achievement, Madam President.

In addition, the UDeCOTT facilities that Sen. Mark referred to, quite a few of UDeCOTT's loan facilities simply have a debenture. For example, the loan for

the waterfront buildings, for Tower A, Tower D, the Hyatt, the car park and so on, all there is, there is a debenture over the assets, Madam President. It is not a government guaranteed debt. So there are quite a few state enterprises which have the capacity to borrow without a government guarantee and they have done so. That is not a contingent liability. In the public debt—and if you go to the *Review of the Economy*—Madam President, if one goes to Appendix 26 in the *Review of the Economy 2020*, there is a breakdown:

“Net Public Sector Debt”—there is a figure

“Domestic Public Sector Debt”—another figure;

“External Public Sector Debt”—that is foreign debt, another figure

“Central Government”

“Domestic”

Build/own/lease transfers—“...and Leases”

“External”

“Contingent Liabilities”

“Guaranteed”—debt

“Statutory Authorities”

“State Enterprises”

“Letters of Guarantee”

“Statutory Authorities”

“State Enterprises”

“Central Government Debt Service”

Everything is there, Madam President. Every single thing is there, every figure, every aspect of debt in Trinidad and Tobago.

So this theory about how things are secret is nonsense. Everything is there, Madam President. Every single thing is there, and if Sen. Mark had gone there he

would have seen that the total public debt in September of last year was 120 billion, and therefore if it went up by 33 per cent, as he says, then we borrowed, how much, 33 per cent of 150 billion? That is \$50 billion. So if anybody—uninformed person is listening to Sen. Mark and do the maths, we increased the public debt by \$50 billion in the last six months? [*Member sucks teeth*] That is irresponsibility at its highest. It is just not true! It is hyperbole! It is exaggeration! It is rumour-mongering! It is scandalization! Bacchanal! I am not happy about this at all, Madam President.

In addition to dealing with the restructuring of state-owned enterprises, we are also leveraging technical assistance from multilateral financial institutions for technical assistance for developing and improving the Ministry of Finance's expertise in areas such as debt sustainability, debt analysis, medium-term debt strategies, and development of medium-term macro-economic frameworks.

With respect to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, when we came into office, Madam President, the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund balance was \$5.6 billion; 5.6 billion US. With all that we have gone through last year, we had to withdraw US \$900 million from that fund just to keep the country afloat. With all that we went through last year, as of today, the balance in the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund is US \$5.7 billion. It is more than it was when we came into office in 2015. So all of this scaremongering about the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund is nothing but that, scaremongering. We have judiciously utilized the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund for the rainy day that exists right now. It is a rainy day fund, and we are having very rainy days.

The Ministry of Finance is also engaging in increased scrutiny on projects and programmes, requiring financing with a view to ensuring value for money and income generation. And, Madam President, let me just say, I am in a Government



as the Minister of Finance for the time being and every day I have to deal with demands from various Ministries and so on, and contrary to what the Senator is saying, we in Finance have to look at every single request that comes to us for money. We have now reached the point where you have to do intense scrutiny, comprehensive analysis of value for money on every project that is brought to us because of the situation that we are in, and make sure that these projects will add to the national economy.

So, our strategy as we go forward—let me just deal with the Motion because Sen. Mark was all over the place. Let me just deal with what the Motion says:

“...that the Government reconsider its borrowing policy in light of this country's rising Debt-to-GDP ratio.”

Madam Speaker—President, sorry, this Government will not fall into that trap. Every country in the world is resorting to borrowing to keep its economy moving. Any country that did that in the face of COVID would collapse. We will not fall into that trap. Developing countries are doing it, middle income countries are doing it, advanced economies are doing it, and they all know that this is what we have to do.

If Sen. Mark had done any research—if he had done any research on the new deal that President Roosevelt put in in the 1930s when they had the Great Depression, he created jobs, he spent money. The only way you can drive an economy, in terms of an economic shock, is to keep it moving. If I were to follow the advice of Sen. Mark and stop borrowing money, we would not be able to advance this economy, we would not be able to help businesses, we would not be able to do construction projects, we would not be able to help manufacturers. We are not going to fall into that trap, but we also will not fall into a debt trap, Madam President. We are very, very careful in the Ministry of Finance in terms of what we

do; very careful. We take advice, we have expert advisors from all over the world and in Trinidad and Tobago, and the only way this country will survive is if the Ministry of Finance provides the necessary cash flow to keep people alive during this pandemic, to keep businesses alive, and the only source of cash flow at this point in time outside of tax revenue is the heritage fund and loan financing, Madam President. So I reject absolutely this Motion from Sen. Mark. I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, are you prepared to wrap up the Motion now?

[*Sen. Mark looks around*]

No one is indicating. Sen. Mark.

**Sen. Wade Mark:** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, I have listened to the hon. Minister of Finance respond to this very important Motion that we have filed today, and as usual the Minister, you know, sought to dismiss several matters that were brought to the fore as it relates to the state of our economy when we looked at this question of the rise in foreign debt.

Madam President, let me make it very, very clear that everyone recognizes that there is a need to borrow money. The problem is not the borrowing, Madam President. The problem is how do you apply the moneys that you have borrowed? How do you allocate the moneys that you have borrowed to ensure there is in fact a productive return so that the population does not end up in what is called “a debt trap”? And I think that is the issue that the Minister really did not pay attention to. Madam President, we know that borrowing, whether it is a borrowing policy or it is a public debt management structure to deal with how we manage our public debt, these are tools that we employ with the aim of accelerating economic growth of alleviating poverty and improving income distribution.

Madam President, the Minister spoke and there was no mention made

whatsoever as it relates to how have the borrowings—the \$122 billion that we have borrowed thus far, how has this help to accelerate economic growth in Trinidad and Tobago? How, Madam President? The reality is that Trinidad and Tobago has not experienced any kind of growth in the last five years and, Madam President, COVID-19 did not take place five years ago. It started in March of 2020. So what happened with all the borrowings that would have taken place before March of 2020? So I think that the Minister of Finance is not really attuned to what the reality of the moment is.

Madam President, we know for a fact that in this country, in the absence of economic growth, we have escalating and rising poverty in our country. We have a worsening of the income distribution levels in our country. So not only do we have, Madam President, growing income inequality in our country, but you have growing wealth disparity. This is the reality that we are faced with in Trinidad and Tobago. And this matter, this Motion that we have tabled here today is extremely serious as it relates to our future economic stability and development as a nation.

**5.20 p.m.**

So I dismiss completely the attempt by the Minister of Finance to simply and whimsically and arbitrarily dismiss matters of such a grave nature. That is the disrespect that the Government has for this country, that they can rise, Madam President, and in a very flippant manner not address the very burning issues that confront our nation. We have been able to demonstrate that with this escalating rate of borrowings the negative consequences it is bound to have on our country. And the Minister talked about credit rating agencies and boasting about the kind of ratings which I have outlined earlier in my contribution.

Madam President, one of the indices, one of the buffers that is responsible for our credit rating being what it is today is the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund

which the PNM did not contribute a cent towards. They were there for five years, not a cent they put into the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund. Instead, Madam President, they are raiding the Stabilisation Fund every Monday morning. So, let us be truthful. The only reason why we have this excellent credit rating or reasonable credit rating from Standard & Poor's, even though we have a negative outlook, is because of the buffers that we have been able to establish.

The foreign exchange reserves of our country; the official foreign exchange reserves, you think it happened by happenstance, Madam President? The Heritage and Stabilisation Fund that the Minister of Finance spoke about and boasted about a short while ago, US \$5.6 billion or US \$5.7 billion which is what it was at the beginning, let us be serious, that did not come about overnight. If it was not for Basdeo Panday establishing the Interim Stabilisation Revenue Fund back then and then that being converted into a Heritage and Stabilisation Fund, the bulk of the moneys that went into it came from the UNC. So it is easy for the Government to rise and carry on as if, for instance, these things are taking place magically. It is not. So for the Minister of Finance to rise and carry on in his usual manner, I guess he is reeling from what is to come on Friday in the other place, so that is why he is so jittery.

Madam President, let us see what has happened. The IADB has identified three reasons why countries contract debt. And I would like to share with this honourable House, Madam President, these three reasons for the transference of debt or the contracting of debt. The IADB says, one, is to transfer income from future to present. That is one of the reasons for this question of why do we contract debt in this country.

The second reason why countries contract debt, Madam President, is to finance development programmes and projects. That is a second reason. Madam

President, let us be real. The third reason is to face a situation of a temporary downturn. And that comes about because of natural disasters and negative shocks as a result of financial crisis. But where are we in the scheme of things, Madam President, when it comes to the borrowing of moneys for financing of development projects? Where are we?

Madam President, most of the projects that we are in fact contracting for development purposes when we look at the reality they are not generating the kind of revenues and incomes. Many of those projects are tied up in all kinds of activities that are not transparent, that are not open, that are not accountable and most of these projects are going to end up as loss making projects.

Madam President, I draw to your attention that you have a lot of projects being financed and funded by the IADB, by CAF. You have projects that are being funded through local borrowings. And you know what is very serious, Madam President, the Minister can dismiss in a flippant manner and sleight of hand manner this Motion. He can say he is rejecting it, he is free to do that. But the reality is that you borrow to finance development projects. Did the Minister indicate to this House, to this Senate how much money they have borrowed as a Government; how many projects they have funded with the moneys they have borrowed; how many of these projects have generated the kind of revenue stream to bring about the kind of stability in economies like ours?

Madam President, we have received nothing, no answers from the Minister of Finance, just old talk. When you borrow money to develop projects and you finance project development or development of projects in our country there is a process that is involved, whether it is domestic borrowing or whether it is international borrowing. But when it comes to domestic borrowings, Madam President, the situation is even graver when it comes to the financing of

development projects.

The absence of any serious oversight, supervision of projects through what is called procurement is absent. Where is the procurement law in the country to deal with the supervision of development projects that are being financed by domestic borrowings that you have in this country? That is why the Minister can behave and he can dismiss things in the way that he has done. Because, there is no respect for the kind of billions of dollars that we are borrowing, that we are supposed to be investing in projects for developmental purposes, and the country's economy is stagnant; the country's economy is receding. And what is taking place, Madam President, is that because of lack of proper procurement there is large scale corruption in this nation. That is what is taking place. But instead of addressing these matters, the Minister decided to just be his usual self.

Madam President, I have raised the matter that as a developing country if you do not manage your debt portfolio properly you are going to end up in the jaws of the International Monetary Fund. This Government has increased our external debt from \$1.5 billion to close to US \$5 billion in less than five years. And the rate at which they are going in terms of borrowing moneys from IADB and from CAF, that is the Latin American Development Bank, and then you have the Chinese that are offering loans. I saw where—I have nothing against the Chinese, let me make it very clear. They are great people, they have done tremendous development. I was happy to hear that in less than 50 years they have abolished absolute poverty in China. I have no problem with the Chinese. I have been to China, I love the people of China, I have no problem with them.

What I am saying, Madam President, is when you come to development we have to be very careful because we are seeing where we are developing a kind of debt reliance on the Chinese and we just have to be careful. And this is what our

literature and research is showing. And that is why, Madam President, we spoke about the need for the Government to look at this debt to GDP ratio, where, for instance, the International Lending Agencies are guiding developing countries, COVID or no COVID, we know we have to borrow a little extra; we know that we have to engage in some extra borrowings in order to deal with our economy and our reality. But, Madam President, you cannot borrow yourself into the debt trap. We cannot head towards the debt trap with our two eyes open. How can we do that? And the Minister has provided us with no comfort whatsoever.

We have asked in our Resolution here for the Government to present, Madam President, let me read, specifically for:

“...the Government to outline specific plans and programmes in respect of fulfilling its debt servicing obligations, in light of the economic constraints caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.”

The Minister flippantly again, Madam President, dismissed this particular resolution. What he went and he spent some time on is where I asked him to reconsider its borrowing policy in light of the country's rising debt to GDP ratio and its negative impact on the country's socio-economic development. That is what the Minister paid attention to and he said he is not falling for any trap set for him by me. I did not ask the Minister to fall into any trap. We are dealing with a debate; we are dealing with the future of our country; we are seeing where the debt is rising exponentially and growing. And there is a price that we will pay. And not we, Madam President, future generations will pay. That is why I was able to demonstrate that we started off in 2010 at \$39,000 per head, man, woman and child owing that, and by the end of 2020, we are somewhere around 70 something, 75 or thereabout thousand dollars.

Madam President, that was September of 2020, we are now in March

heading towards April. Where are we going with this rising debt to GDP in terms of per capita? Where are we going? So we hear from Barbados, 126 per cent debt to GDP ratio, Nevis and Jamaica. What does that have to do with us, Madam President, in terms of our management of our resources? We have to manage our resources, it is limited. And, Madam President, we have to productively allocate resources that we have borrowed so that we can get returns on those investments. That is what this Motion is about.

When history is written about this Government, Madam President, and how they mishandled our economy and how they misspent and mismanaged our resources, history will condemn this PNM Government for what they have done. Here it is, a Private Member's Motion on the debt of our country and calling on the Government to bring specific plans and programmes to this Parliament so we can see how you are going to fulfil your debt obligations and that is dismissed by the PNM Government. That is the extent of respect. That is the contempt that they have for the people of this country. The Minister made no reference whatsoever to the specific plans and programmes that the Government has to deal with this rising debt and how we are going to meet those rising debt obligations. He rejected the Motion.

Madam President, time longer than twine you know and the longest rope has an end. Do not believe that you can just continue to dismiss people's concerns and the nation's concerns about this rising debt crisis in our country, you know. Madam President, because—look I spoke about interest payments. Did the Minister make any reference to the rising interest payments and the implications of that for socio-economic development in this country? Madam President, I did not hear the Minister make any mention of the growing interest payments on our debt obligations in this country.



Madam President, could you imagine that close to \$5 billion is going towards the servicing of our interest payments every year. In 2020, at the end of September 2020 it was almost, approximately TT \$5 billion. You know what that money could do for development in this country or half of it, Madam President? But, no, this Minister is too busy. He has no time to deal with the realities confronting this country.

Madam President, every time you pay that kind of moneys toward interest payment you are going to be losing that amount that could have been used elsewhere, that could have been reallocated elsewhere. So it means to say that if the Government is not prepared to provide this Parliament with specific plans and programmes to deal with how it is going to fulfil its debt obligations, by the end of next year, Madam President, the interest payment on our debt obligations will rise from five billion to maybe six billion. And is that what this society really need? So as I said, these are issues that we have to pay attention to.

Madam President, the accumulation of public debt is going to lead to difficult managerial issues. It is going to increase our country's vulnerability to fiscal, as well as financial crisis, and those are going to be intensified and their duration will also extend and expand, Madam President.

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

**Sen. W. Mark:** Madam President, it has now become clear in the literature and our international experience that when public debt surpasses a certain threshold, it becomes a serious deterrent of development. This is according to ECLAC. And that is why we are advancing that when the debt to GDP ratio exceeds even 40 per cent and we are now at the end of September, 82.7 per cent, and according to the Central Bank Data Centre we are now over 90 per cent in terms of gross public sector debt. Even at a debt to GDP ratio of 40 per cent that ratio has a negative

impact on economic growth. And therefore when it surpasses the 40 per cent and it has gone past that, Madam President, the probability of a debt crisis increases significantly and therefore debt intolerance and even debt default can become real in this country.

So, Madam President, even though the Minister did not deal with it, in my closing remarks let me just address the implications of this rising debt to GDP ratio. Madam President, the burden shifts from one generation to the next. Once deficit financing continues, this country is going to mortgage our children's future. I did not hear the Minister speak to that issue in terms of this burden shifting from one generation to the other. If this country is unable to repay its rising public debt, Madam President, it will impact negatively on our ability to attract foreign investment. Foreign investment will therefore decline and future loan sourcing or the sourcing of future loans will also be challenged. And, Madam President, in this context I want to say it is important that we have a very strong and independent Central Bank that will be able to be used to stabilize our economy and not to be allowed or not to be used by any government to simply print money in an effort to create a spectacle that can cause hyperinflation in our country.

Madam President, I believe that the national debt, given what is taking place and the Minister's very negative response to this Motion without any obligation or commitment to providing specifics as it relates to programmes and plans, it is our view that this projection, our projection is that the debt to GDP ratio is going to only worsen under this Minister of Finance and under this Government and the situation is going to just worsen for the citizenry as more and more moneys that ought to be going toward goods and services, whether it is health care, whether it is education, whether it is nutrition, Madam President, it will now go towards debt repayment, particularly the interest component. So, Madam President, I have made

my case, history will judge us on this matter and with those few words, Madam President, I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question put.*

**Madam President:** Motion is not carried.

**Sen. Mark:** Division.

**Madam President:** Sen. Mark, just as a point though, you should have said that before I announced the result, but we will go through the division.

**Sen. Mark:** Sorry, Ma'am, I was not—

*The Senate divided:*      Ayes 6      Noes      17

AYES

Mark, W.

John, Ms. J.

Lutchmedial, Ms. J.

Lyder, D.

Nakhid, D.

Roberts, A.

NOES

Khan, Hon. F.

Gopee-Scoon, Hon. P.

Rambharat, Hon. C.

Sinanan, Hon. R.

Hosein, Hon. K.

West, Hon. A.

Browne, Hon. Dr. A.

Mitchell, Hon. R.

de Freitas, N.

Cox, Hon. D.

Singh, Hon. A.

Sagramsingh-Sooklal, Hon. R.

Bacchus, Hon. H.

Lezama-Lee Sing, Mrs. L.

Bethelmy, Ms. Y.

Richards, P.

*The following Senators abstained:* Mr. A Vieira, Ms. C. Seepersad, Mr. D. Teemal, Mrs. H. Thompson-Ahye, Dr. M. Dillon-Remy, Mr. E. Welch.

*Motion negatived. [Desk thumping]*

### ADJOURNMENT

**The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries (Sen. The Hon. Franklin Khan):** Thank you very much, Madam President. Madam President, I beg to move that this Senate do now adjourn to Wednesday March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021 at 1.30 p.m.; that is tomorrow. We will be dealing with the CARIFORUM Bill and we will be taking it through all its stages.

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

#### **Immigration Division Upgraded Digitalized System**

##### **(Government to Address Challenges)**

**Sen. W. Mark:** *[Desk thumping]* Yes, thank you, Madam President. Madam President, the first matter I would like to address deals with the need for the Government to immediately address the challenges being experienced by staff at the Immigration Division with the recently upgraded digitalized system provided by the Canadian Bank Note Corporation.

Madam President, the Immigration Division is made up of the following

office holders: The Chief Immigration Officer and five assistant Chief Immigration Officers, one for the north airport, one for the south ports, one for Tobago, one that deals with investigation and one that deals with passport.

Madam President, the Immigration Division has now become digitalized and with that there are three core areas that have been addressed via this system. There is a digital system dealing with persons leaving and entering the country via the seaports and the airports. There is one dealing with the passport machine readable—there is one called the passport machine-readable system and of course there is one dealing with permits, whether it is for missionaries or students.

Madam President, within those areas all Immigration Officers would have access to the system relevant to their pertinent or relevant areas of operations. However, since the arrival in this country of one Delcy Rodríguez in April of 2020, it was observed that by June of that said year the entire system was shut down by the Government using the upgrade of the system as a cover.

**5.50 p.m.**

Madam President, the company that supplied the system and owns the intellectual property right is a company known as Canadian Bank Note. Now, this new system has cost the taxpayers millions of dollars to operate. This country also has to pay an annual licence fee to this said company called Canadian Note—corporation. However, Madam President, since the system has been upgraded, only a few persons have had access to it. None of the five Assistant Chief Immigration Officers, according to our information, have had access to the system and the Government needs to explain why.

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

No airport or seaport officers have access to the system. As such, Mr. Vice-President, persons are entering and leaving this country in the old fashion way,

meaning paper. Now, we understand, Mr. Vice-President, that since recently, that is, between June and September, when all the systems were down and everything was being done on a paper system basis. That has changed since January. In January, all systems were back up and were running at the airports and the seaports, however, all five Assistant Chief Immigration Officers have still been denied access even when the system is up and running. These five Assistant Chief Immigration Officers have no access, or do not have, I should say, full access, and they can only do so in terms of access, on a reporting basis.

Mr. Vice-President, only the Chief Immigration Officer and a chosen few have access to the system. Now, if any of the Assistants, which is the five Assistants, need information in that particular system, they have to go through what is called the Chief Immigration Officer or the heavy hands of bureaucracy. Mr. Vice-President, to date, there is a backlog of paperwork that has to enter the system. Mr. Vice-President, between the months of June 2020 to December 2020, data has not been entered into the digitalized system. So this means, Mr. Vice-President, that we do not know who came into the country, who left the country during that period, and why is the Government hiding this information from these particular individuals. So this is a matter of grave concern. So that the only persons who have access are the Chief Immigration Officer and, as I said, a selected few. I have their names here, but I would want to not call their names at this time.

I will give the Minister an opportunity to clear the air on these selected people. One is R.H.; that is for your consumption, Mr. Vice-President. The other one is G; that is only for your consumption. There is a junior employee who is a clerk. I have the name, D.B. I have their names here. I am giving the Minister and the Government an opportunity to clear the air on this matter before I go public. Again, now, why are these people who are junior to these Assistants, Mr. Vice-

President, being given access to the Immigration digitalized system and not them? Under the Public Service Regulations and law they are supposed to have access.

Mr. Vice-President, it is also alleged—and we need to clear it up—that persons are allowed on CAL flights without exemptions and they are arriving in Trinidad and Tobago, and once they arrive here and they have a T&T passport, they cannot be refused entry. So the system apparently is being used and is being manipulated by senior personnel.

**Mr. Vice-President:** Senator, you have two more minutes.

**Sen. W. Mark:** So by law, Mr. Vice-President, we need to get clarification on this matter. There is another matter that I would like to close and I would need to get clarification.

Under the Immigration Act, can the Minister indicate whether, Mr. Vice-President, some 16,000 registered Venezuelans are now receiving citizenship? We would like the Minister to indicate whether he is deciding on those 16,000 registered persons, Venezuelans, and, Mr. Vice-President, we would like to know what impact this will have on the future of our country particularly in the upcoming general elections. We want the Minister of National Security to tell us if he has granted or has begun to grant citizenship to 16,000 Venezuelans in the immigration system. These are matters that are of grave importance. We have more information which we shall reveal at the appropriate time, but we are giving the Minister and the Government an opportunity to clear the air on these matters before we take it further. I thank you very much, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries.

**The Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat):** Mr. Vice-President, I thank you for the opportunity to respond to my

colleague, Sen. Mark, my colleague and friend. I know after his two defeats today he is hoping for the best in this one. [*Laughter and desk thumping*] But, Mr. Vice-President, what he has presented me as my friend, he has presented fallacy, misinformation and a very, very small piece of fact. I would not detain anybody here in responding to the fallacy and misinformation. The Motion is like an octopus with all bits and pieces sticking out of irrelevance, and only one small fact. It has wasted our time like what went before today. So let me deal with that small fact.

Mr. Vice-President, it is a fact that in the changeover to this upgraded system there were some small issues facing the Immigration Officers, and that had to do with their unfamiliarity with two new security features in this system. One of them is something that even on your cell phone you have that. It is called double authentication log in system—double authentication—and all it means is that the officers are now required to have two levels of authentication which involves two pieces of data; generally, a password and a fingerprint. So in using double authentication there were some challenges at the start.

The second one had to do with the expiration of passwords, and as Sen. Mark correctly identified in the opening, access to information on the old system had to do with what he said, the officers have access to the area relevant to their functions. And in this case it is the same thing, except that the passwords expire and that is related to when the officers can access certain functions and when they cannot access certain functions. And those were the challenges, and that word “challenges” represents the small piece of fact in this Motion.

And, Mr. Vice-President, to overcome this challenge, the Ministry of National Security ensured that there was additional training for the Immigrations Officers, and they were given the opportunity to learn the system and strengthen



their capacity, and understand how to use the system, and in doing that there was no compromise of security, productivity, or output.

The issues relating to citizenship, Venezuelans, voting, Delcy, COVID, CAL, exemptions; are fallacies, misinformation irrelevant to this Motion, and I am happy to address that small bit of fact to say the officers are using the system and things are working fine. Thank you very much. [*Desk thumping*]

**Non-Payment of Salary Relief Grants  
(Preschool and Private School Teachers)**

**Mr. Vice-President:** Sen. Mark

**Sen. Wade Mark:** The other area I need to get some clarification on, Mr. Vice-President, has to do with complaints that have reached me concerning the stressed preschool and private school teachers who have complained of not receiving their salary relief grants for which they have applied. Now, this is a very touchy issue because we are dealing with workers, employees at the preschool level and the private school level. So I have been bombarded by a number of requests and I have advised those persons once they have made their application, they need to approach the relevant agency which is the Ministry of Finance or in this instance, Social Development and Family Services. But it appears to me that there is something in the system that is not facilitating the quick dispatch of these salary relief grants to these preschool and private school teachers.

Now, Mr. Vice-President, the Government might be in a better position to indicate what number of applications they have been able to process based on applications that have been made to them involving hundreds of preschool and private school teachers over the last period, particularly when this COVID-19 pandemic began in our country in March, on March the 13<sup>th</sup>, I should say, 2020. So this Motion is really seeking clarification from the Government as to whether there

is a logjam, whether there is some kind of crisis in the system that is permitting applications for salary relief grants to these preschool and private school teachers from being accessed.

As I said that the Minister can provide us in this Senate with data, because once people make applications they are supposed to be recorded in the relevant Ministry. So I am seeking to highlight the plight of these individuals who have been complaining about not being in receipt of these salary relief grants since they made their applications months ago. As I said I cannot vouch for the numbers involved. All I know, a few have approached me on this matter and they told me that there are several of them without salary relief grants even though they have submitted their applications to the relevant authorities. So my responsibility is to highlight their plight and to try to get clarification from the Government as to what is the status of those outstanding applications that they have made, that is, preschool and private school teachers for salary relief grants.

Where are these applications; have they been processed; are they being processed; how many have been paid; how many have not been paid; and when would all be paid in terms of those preschool and private school teachers? So this is my submission to the hon. Minister of Finance and I am hoping that he would provide some clarification to those teachers, both at the preschool and private level to determine what is taking place with their salary relief grants. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

**Mr. Vice-President:** Minister of Finance.

**The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert):** Thank you, Mr. Vice-President. I am answering this matter on the Motion for the Adjournment on behalf of the Minister of Education to whom it was originally addressed. What I have come to report is the information we have been able to give today based on enquiries today.

The disaggregation of grants and applications for grants for salary relief is quite a complex matter. The grants are filed based on National Insurance numbers and not necessarily on occupations and other identifying factors but we have tried our best having been given notice of this earlier today. And the information I got to date, is that there were 1,481 applications for the salary relief grant for employees at private preschools and day care facilities. Of that number, I am advised that 534 were deemed to be ineligible.

The reasons why applicants would not be eligible are as follows, it would be one more of the following reasons. That either the applicant or their employer is not registered with the National Insurance System, and therefore, does not have an NIS number. So that is one of the first reasons why persons who applied for the salary relief grant would be deemed to be ineligible because the salary relief grant was designed for persons within the NIS system. There is another grant that is paid by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services; that is the income support grant which is of the same amount, \$1,500 per month for a period of up to three months or a maximum of \$4,500. And persons who are not registered for NIS, either themselves or their employer, would need or would have needed to apply to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services. So that is the first reason.

The second reason would be an invalid termination date. In other words, they lost their job before the 12<sup>th</sup> of March, 2020, when the first Public Health Regulations came into play with the closure of schools. So they may have lost their job in February or January, or even before, and they would have applied, but they would be deemed to be ineligible for this particular relief grant. They would have to apply for other grants again to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services because we in Finance had very strict criteria approved by Cabinet in

terms of persons who would qualify for this particular grant.

The third reason is that they did not lose their job because of COVID-19 Regulations. They may have lost their job for other reasons. They have lost their job for cause or some other reason. So that they did not get confirmation from their employer that they lost their job because of the COVID-19 restrictions. They were unable to supply that.

Fourth reason is no proof of citizenship because there are quite a few people who were not citizens who were applying for this grant. This grant was restricted to citizens.

Fifth reason, they provided no identification documents. No ID card, no driver's permit, no passport with their application in order to confirm that the applicant was in fact a citizen and had the identification particulars in their application. And the sixth reason, the declaration not signed.

What the Salary Relief Grant Unit did, not just for these applicants but for all, was to contact them, and in some cases it was difficult because they did not provide their telephone number, or the email address was wrong. So it proved to be a little difficult, but the Unit continued to try to contact these people to deal with these issues. For example, something like a lack of an identification card could be resolved by the person sending it in and so on, or signing the declaration, just doing it over and sending it in. So some of them are fairly simple to deal with, some of them, not easy to deal with because if the employer says that person did not lose their job because of COVID, they lost it because of absenteeism or something like that, then we in Finance could not give them that grant. They would have to go to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

Of the 1,481 that I am advised are on our system for employees at private, preschools and day care centres, 728 have received the grant, 219 will shortly be

paid by prepaid debit cards. These are people who do not have bank accounts because there were quite a few people who are not in the banking system, and therefore, the way to deal with them is to give them a debit card that is loaded with the money for the grant. So 728 received directly through their bank account by wire transfer, 219 are to receive prepaid debit cards and we still have 534 that we are trying our best to see how we can assist them in terms of correcting their applications. Of course, if a person is not a citizen and they are not in the National Insurance System, we cannot deal with that and they will have to go to the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services.

So that is the information available to me and I want to give the assurance that I keep impressing upon the staff in the Unit, they must continue to go through all of the persons deemed to be ineligible and see how they could help anybody who is able to correct their application by providing proof of citizenship, identification, or signing the declaration. I thank you, Mr. Vice-President. [*Desk thumping*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Senate adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 6.13 p.m.*