

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Wednesday, March 23, 2022*

The House met at 10.00 a.m.

PRAYERS[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**LEAVE OF ABSENCE**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from Mr. Dinesh Rambally, MP, Member for Chaguanas West, and Dr. Rai Ragbir, MP, Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla, who have requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Members seek is granted.

**IMMIGRATION (CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY SKILLED NATIONALS)
(AMDT.) BILL, 2022**

Bill to amend the Immigration (Caribbean Community Skilled Nationals) Act, Chap. 18:03, brought from the Senate [*The Minister of Foreign and Caricom Affairs*]; read the first time.

PAPERS LAID

1. Second Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Agricultural Society of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended December 31, 2005. [*The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Proceeds of Crime Act, Chap. 11:27 Seized Assets Fund Account for the years ended September 30, 2017 to September 30, 2021. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

Papers 1 and 2 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.

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3. The Report on the Management of the Seized Assets Fund for the financial years ended September 30, 2017 to September 30, 2021. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
4. Financial Institutions (Capital Adequacy) Regulations, 2020. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
5. Corporation Tax (Small and Medium Enterprises Loan Guarantee Programme) (Extension of Exemption) Order, 2022. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
6. Annual Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation for the period 01 October, 2011 to 30 September, 2012. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
7. Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Extension of Period for Payment of Fifty Percent of Fixed Penalty) Order, 2022. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Education to the First Report of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration on an inquiry into the effects of the hybrid learning system on student performance in government and government-assisted schools during the revised COVID-19 restrictions.

[*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

Occupational Safety and Health Agency (Completion of Investigation into Divers' Deaths)

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Prime Minister: Will the Prime Minister inform this House if the Cabinet has been advised when the investigation launched by the Occupational Safety and Health Agency into the accident which led to the deaths of four divers at Paria Fuel Trading Company on the 25th February, 2022, will be completed?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, as the Member knows, the investigation by OSHA under the law is not a matter for the Cabinet

until a report is produced. No report has been produced and therefore, there is no role for the Cabinet at this time and there is nothing to report until the OSHA has done its work, Madam Speaker. This is not at this stage a Cabinet matter.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Prime Minister, has the Government, through the Cabinet, enquired of the timeline when this will be completed through the Minister of Labour?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The Government has made no such enquiry because the Government expects OSHA under law to conduct its business with dispatch.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva South.

Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago (Loan to Facilitate Retrenchment)

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you very much. Prime Minister: Will the Prime Minister inform this House if the Cabinet has been advised by the State majority owned Telecommunications Services of Trinidad and Tobago that it has taken a loan for the sum of TT \$476 million to facilitate a retrenchment exercise at the said company?.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, as the Member knows, TSTT is in the process of corporate restructuring to ensure its continued survival as a profitable enterprise. As part of that restructuring, discussions are underway with the recognized trade union as required by law. Funding is required to support the restructuring effort and TSTT, which is 51 per cent owned by the local population and 49 per cent by a foreign company, is in the process of securing the necessary loan financing. Due to the sensitivity of this matter and the stage it has reached, it would be premature and irresponsible of me to say anything further at this time.

Mr. Indarsingh: So, Prime Minister, could you further advise if, indeed, 573

people have been identified to lose their jobs through this restructuring exercise?

Hon. Member: Could be more.

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, that matter of the number of persons, or any person for that matter, and retrenchment has not been completed, has not been decided. The restructuring details are underway within the company and we will await the outcome of those discussions in the proper and normal manner.

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

**Committee to Investigate COVID-19 Pandemic
(Implementation of Recommendations)**

Dr. Lackram Bodoë (*Fyzabad*): Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Bodoë: Question No. 3: Will the Prime Minister indicate whether the Government intends to implement any of the recommendations made by the Committee appointed to investigate the COVID-19 pandemic?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, the answer to that question is yes. The Government is addressing the issue of staff comfort and accommodation and has already done so in some areas.

Secondly, a national NCD coordinator has been engaged to develop and implement a national NCD policy.

Thirdly, data management, inclusive of the matter of electronic health records, is currently being worked on together with the Ministry of Digital Transformation.

Fourthly, the mental well-being of staff is ongoing and, in fact, has been ongoing during the pandemic.

Fifthly, Madam Speaker, more frequent and empathetic communication with

patients and their families has been addressed by the regional authorities.

These have been the recommendations, coming out of that, and we have acted on it, through the Ministry of Health, with great alacrity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

**International Energy Conference and Expo
(Prime Minister's Declination of Invitation)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Will the Prime Minister state why he declined the invitation to attend the International Energy Conference and Expo in Guyana held over the period February 15 to 18, 2022?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, as all invitations are, the person receiving the invitation is in a position to accept or not accept, depending on the circumstances of the invitation. This particular invitation to me to attend personally did not fit with my schedule but Trinidad and Tobago was fully represented at the conference with the Ministry and other agencies involved in a strong contingent, and the business of Trinidad and Tobago was, in fact, conducted as is normal in these matters.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Is the Prime Minister allowing his personal friendship with the former President, David Granger, to cloud his judgment regarding our foreign policy towards Guyana?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima, that does not qualify as a supplemental question based on the original question and the answer. Member for Naparima.

Removal of Trinidad and Tobago from EU Blacklist

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Will the Prime Minister state what more must be done to remove Trinidad and Tobago from the EU blacklist, given that Trinidad and Tobago remains the only Caricom state listed as a “non-cooperative jurisdiction for tax purposes” as of February 24, 2022?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, given the behaviour of our colleagues on the other side with respect to these matters, when they came to the Parliament, you would think that this is not a question coming from somebody who is interested in the outcome. Trinidad and Tobago is an Annex 1 of the list of non-cooperative tax jurisdictions as at February 24, 2022.

To be removed from this list, Trinidad and Tobago has done and is in the process of completing the following: Global Forum tax transparency. To become largely compliant with the Global Forum, Trinidad and Tobago is awaiting the next peer review which is scheduled for its first quarter 2023. Trinidad and Tobago is currently working with the Global Forum on a technical assistance programme to achieve this compliance.

Madam Speaker, I myself personally met with a major delegation from the EU not too long ago on this matter and the EU is cooperating with Trinidad and Tobago in assisting us in doing this.

With respect to the BEPS Action 5 on Harmful Tax Practices, our tax-free zone regime must be abolished since it is considered by the Global Forum as a harmful tax regime. Trinidad and Tobago has an active SEZ legislation, 2022. We are in the process of operationalizing the new SEZ regime, which includes the drafting of new regulations. Trinidad and Tobago is currently working with the Forum on Harmful Tax Practices, Secretariat of the OECD, to remove these issues.

Action 13, Country-by-Country Reporting: Trinidad and Tobago to introduce country-by-country reporting with respect to transfer pricing. TrinidadandTobago gave a commitment to EU to implement same by autumn 2023. This is currently engaging the OECD BEPS Secretariat on an action plan for the way forward. Madam Speaker, we are currently engaged and the EU is very cooperative with us on this matter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Has the Government sought assistance from our fellow Caricom States who seem to know what to do to get off the EU list?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, the business of Trinidad and Tobago is not identical with the business of our other Caricom countries. And we, in this country, are responsible for the business and interest of TrinidadandTobago, and we are not, in fact, led by what others have done in their situation, which is not identical to TrinidadandTobago's.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Commission of Enquiry into Divers' Deaths (Commencement of)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Will the Prime Minister state when the commission of enquiry will commence its investigation into the recent deaths of the four divers?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, the Government has done all that is properly required to be done. We have put in place a commission of enquiry. We have identified the personnel and we did indicate at the time that the commission was expected be a three-man commission, and we did

identify two persons. We did indicate that those two persons would be able to function as the quorum, as we sought the third person from outside of Trinidad and Tobago.

What we have been advised, as we did that looking for that third person, is that what is possible to be arranged is to have a foreign firm that does these investigations, act in a consultant role to the two-man commission, and that is what we propose to do from here on in, Madam Speaker. Having done that, we will facilitate, as we are facilitating the physical infrastructural arrangement and other support for the commission, and it will be up to the chairman of the commission to determine what calls are made for papers and appearances, and the commission will conduct its business as an independent body, independent of the Cabinet or of the Member for Naparima.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Prime Minister, in light of your response that a three-man committee is now a two-man committee supported by a foreign firm, could you indicate to the families, the villagers, the community and the country when exactly would this commission of enquiry begin its work, bearing in mind that it is almost a month since the ill-fated tragedy of the four divers?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East, I believe that question was asked and answered. Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Second—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you. My second supplemental question.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you. Madam Speaker, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's East ate some anatomy of a parrot and cannot stay quiet.

Madam Speaker: All right. Okay. So, remember, all Members, what is our overriding objective here is to do the people's business with a certain sense of decorum. Member for Oropouche East, you are invited to ask your question.

Dr. Moonilal: I accept the invitation. Prime Minister, again on this matter, could you indicate as of this time whether any family, members of family, children or anyone associated with the four divers have received any compensation of any kind from the Government of Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I have no such information.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

**Gas Exporting Countries Forum
(Benefits of Prime Minister's Visit)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Will the Prime Minister identify, in measurable terms, the economic benefits derived from his recent visit to Qatar for the Sixth Summit of Heads of State and Government of the Gas Exporting Countries Forum?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, the Gas Exporting Countries Forum represents 70 per cent of the world's gas reserves. Trinidad and Tobago is a founding member. This body also represents 54 per cent of LNG exported globally. We are involved in the global business of exporting LNG. Trinidad and Tobago's attendance at the GECF heads summit is crucial and strategic to ensure that our voices were at the decision-making tables.

Madam Speaker, the Member would know that there is a lobby in the world today, which is gathering momentum, to decertify gas and, to a certain extent, oil, as products in the international energy mix. And international banks are being encouraged not to fund investment and exploration in these businesses. So, when the Gas Exporting Countries Forum meets to discuss this danger to

Trinidad and Tobago, a country where this is our largest economic input, and we are there to put our voice to defend gas as the clean energy and to ensure that the gas business remains a major part of the energy mix, I do not think a Standard 5 child needs to know that Trinidad and Tobago needs to be there and to have its voice heard in this matter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Prime Minister, in terms of measurability, Mia Mottley left Guyana with 10,000 jobs. Would it not have been better to go to Guyana than to go to Qatar?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: What do you have in Guyana? “Why yuh doh go to Guyana if you want to be in Guyana?” As a Member of Parliament in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago “yuh” always talking about Guyana and Barbados. If you are unhappy here, you are free to go. Nobody has tied you here.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Do not come and talk to me about Mia Mottley. I am the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, and I speak for Trinidad and Tobago, and I look after Trinidad and Tobago's interests.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: If you have interests elsewhere—and, Madam Speaker, what is offensive about this—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—this is the Member who disgraced us in New York.

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: You are the only Member of any government—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister—

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—the only Member of any Government—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—that met with—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping and crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Order! Order!

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]—when the Speaker is on her legs!

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Dr. Moonilal: “What yuh think it is?” Balisier House?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, he “not” chairing Balisier House, General Council meeting.

Hon. Member: This is your House!

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: [*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Member: Just rude.

Madam Speaker: Now, Members, all Members, I remind you of Standing Order 53. This shouting match across the floor will not be tolerated. Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(6). The Prime Minister is imputing improper motives to me.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: And I am an honourable man.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: I overrule. Do you have another question?

**Former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries
(Provision of Information Regarding State Lands Corruption)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Will the Prime Minister indicate whether the former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries provided information to him regarding corruption in the transfer of state lands by senior public officials?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): The answer is yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much for the one-word answer. Prime Minister, could you indicate whether in this matter, as you did with complaints about firearms and so on, you have sought to establish any committee to investigate the validity of claims by the former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries of widespread corruption in land dealings?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I can confirm as early as November 2015, the then Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries spoke to me regarding possible corruption connected to state land development. I gave the Minister advice which he followed. Thereafter, I received from the Minister right up to the last week, letters, reports and information regarding fraudulent dealings with state land and other aspects of potential criminal conduct. Many involved public officials, including very senior ones.

On each occasion, I did three things. I listened to what was said, read what was provided and I instructed the Minister to report the matter to the Commissioner of Police or any other public authority, and I gave the Minister my assurance of full support for any action taken by him.

At almost every Cabinet meeting, I gave the Minister the fullest opportunity to discuss matters with the Cabinet and on many occasions, he did, right up to the last Cabinet meeting last Wednesday. To the best of my knowledge, some of those matters are with the police—being acted upon by the police.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: If there are other matters which are still before us to go to other authorities, they will be so forwarded.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: I give way to—

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Prime Minister, could you confirm whether or not those reports that came to you involved the conduct of any current Cabinet Minister in this sordid affair of stealing state lands?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I am happy to report that none of the reports, none of the documents provided to me on this particular subject involves any person in the Cabinet which I lead.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central. **Collapsed Roadway at Mosquito Creek**
(Status of Investigations into)

Mr. Arnold Ram (*Caroni Central*): Will the Prime Minister inform this House on the status of investigations into the collapse of the roadway at Mosquito Creek?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, the construction of the Mosquito Creek incorporates 2.4 kilometres of northbound carriageways and includes miscellaneous works that are revetment, sea wall, bridges and utility

relocation, amongst other aspects. Approximately 2 kilometres of the southbound carriageway has been successfully opened to the traffic since 2019.

Within the ongoing construction zone of the 2.4 northbound carriageway, a localized 180-metre failure zone occurred. On Saturday, January 22, 2022, the National Infrastructure Development Company, NIDCO, confirmed a slope instability along the northern carriageway of the Mosquito Creek. In an effort to minimize propagation of the failure, the cracks were initially covered to prevent ingress of surface run-off, and the earth fills and the pavement loads on the embankment were immediately reduced.

The area is presently being monitored on a daily basis by the project managers of NIDCO and AECOM, the engineer. NIDCO has engaged the services of Earth Investigation Systems Limited, led by the geotechnical engineer, Dr. Derek Gay. Dr. Gay, together with AECOM's team of technical experts, is at present investigating the road failure in an effort to determine causality and propose a suitable solution.

Specialist equipment was required, which recently arrived in Trinidad and Tobago. Approximately 50 cone penetration tests are to be undertaken, with 14 completed as of today. Analysis of the information received is undergoing and will form the basis of a report for the Ministry of Works and Transport.

To review the final report submitted by NIDCO, the Ministry of Works and Transport has appointed a committee comprising senior engineers, chaired by the Ministry's Chief Technical Officer. Additionally, the Ministry has requested the assistance of the CAF Development Bank.

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, your speaking time has now expired.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Prime Minister, in light of your incomplete answer, could you indicate whether or not the NIDCO report that is complete would be made public?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I do not know what the report is, what it is going to look like, or what it is going to be, and until such time as the report is available, I will not make that commitment. But I expect that a report like that should be in such a position that it could be laid in the Parliament, if and when that decision is taken by the Cabinet.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. Prime Minister, we just want to confirm that the NIDCO—I am asking the question—you are not aware of the contents of a NIDCO report on the collapse of the Mosquito Creek that will cost \$50 million to fix. And as Prime Minister, are you telling us that you really have never seen this report?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I run a government, I do not run a fish market. There is a Ministry of Works and Transport that has the responsibility for dealing with this report and this report has not come before the Cabinet at this time. I just indicated that there are serious investigations underway and therefore, the Cabinet will await the outcome of these. We are not anticipating, rather we are awaiting the serious technical investigations and the findings as reported by the experts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central.

**Judicial and Legal Service Commission
(Withdrawal of Complaint against CPC)**

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Mr. Arnold Ram (*Caroni Central*): Prime Minister: Will the Prime Minister inform this House whether the complaint against the Chief Parliamentary Counsel to the Judicial and Legal Service Commission will be withdrawn by his Government?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, I know nothing about any report that the Cabinet has to deal with to withdraw. That matter is not before the Cabinet and therefore, I will not comment upon it.

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Can the Prime Minister state whether he agrees with the position that the Chief Parliamentary Counsel is only authorized to draft laws with the Cabinet and/or Prime Minister's approval?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

10.30 a.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: That is asking for an opinion. It is not within the Standing Orders. Member for Naparima.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Regional Food Security (Participation in Initiative)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Yeah. Thank you. Will the Prime Minister state what role, if any, Trinidad and Tobago intends to play in a regional food security initiative led by Guyana and Barbados?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has always played any role required by the country in any of these regional

initiatives. We have done so with instances of programmes led by Belize. We have also had those situations with Guyana. The latest initiative is on the table and if there is any role that Trinidad and Tobago can play towards regional food security, we will play that role. But we anticipate that such a role will be largely played by the private sector of Trinidad and Tobago so we await the specifics of these proposals.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Prime Minister, given our significant food import bill and the potential, given the crisis in the Ukraine, for wheat and other products to increase, do you not think that Trinidad should be leading such—should be taking a leadership role in such an initiative?

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago cannot take a leadership role on Guyanese resources and somebody should tell that Member for Naparima that. This whole thing has to do with Guyana's land and Guyana's resources. And insofar as Guyana invites the rest of Caricom, we will play a role. But to ask me to take a leadership role, Madam Speaker, is just to be annoying.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Barbados seems to be significant in the Caricom region—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: What is your story with Barbados?

Mr. Charles:—and we seem to be behind.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: What is your story with Barbados?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Every time you get up in this Parliament is Barbados, Barbados, Barbados, Barbados. What is wrong with you?

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni Central.

**Land Grabbing
(Receipt of Reports)**

Mr. Arnold Ram (*Caroni Central*): Madam Speaker, through you. Will the Prime Minister advise if he is in receipt of reports of land grabbing made by the former Minister Clarence Rambharat? I believe that may have been asked and answered in question 8, please. So in the circumstances, I withdraw.

Madam Speaker: So you withdraw.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there are 18 questions for oral answer and we will be answering all 18 questions. There are 14 for written answer. We will be answering 12 and asking for a two-week deferral for questions 61 and 79.

Madam Speaker: Thank you. Member for Mayaro.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

**Corruption Perception Index
(New Measures to Address)**

72. Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Prime Minister:

In light of Trinidad and Tobago's score of 41/100 on the Corruption Perception Index, will the hon. Prime Minister state what specific new measures will be taken to improve the country's global standing?

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago's current score on the Corruption Perceptions Index is based on data from the year 2020. This means that the work done by the Government in tackling

corruption and the perception of corruption since then will only be reflected in the next annual report, which will be based on data from 2021.

The specific area of focus which is of impact—which impact is of mutual interest to Transparency International and the Government and will positively impact our country's score in the future is the enactment and enforcement of special-purpose legislation which improves the ability of the authorities to fight and contain corruption in the public sector.

In this regard, Madam Speaker, in particular the Government has over the last year passed the Gambling (Gaming and Betting) Control Act, 2021, enacted on August 11, 2021, to regulate an industry flagged by the IMF and FATF as a root contributor in money laundering and corruption matters.

Two, passed the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, 2021, assented to on December 23, 2021, to treat with the better administration of revenue and in particular to allow for the elimination of tax evasion as a predicate offence in money laundering which is a hallmark of corruption.

Three, introduce the Representation of the People (Amdt.) (No. 2) Bill, 2020, now referred to a parliamentary Joint Select Committee to treat with the issue of campaign finance legislation, which has been flagged as a root cause of corruption.

We have also passed the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property (Amdt.) Act, 2020, and the 10 Regulations required to operationalize the Act with the Regulations affirmed by the Senate in February 2022, which will improve the systems of procurements across all public bodies, again, addressing a core issue.

Continued the operationalization of the Civil Asset Recovery Agency pursuant to the Civil Asset Recovery and Management and Unexplained Wealth

Act, 2019, to expand the range of options available in the fight against corruption.

We have also introduced the Whistleblower Protection Bill, 2020, introduced in the House of Representatives on January 14, 2022, to address the critical need for protection of witnesses to improper conduct in public and private institutions.

Madam Speaker, it is noteworthy that the critical legislation regarding whistleblower protection, which is seen as a very important tool in the fight across the world against corruption, requires a special majority and the support of the Opposition. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Tourist Arrivals (Details of)

82. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts:

Will the Minister state the number of tourist arrivals to Trinidad and to Tobago respectively since the opening of borders to January 31, 2022?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts. And I just want to remind all Members who have to speak, any time that your time is going to exceed five minutes, I will invite you to go into the booth.

The Minister of Tourism, Culture and the Arts (Sen. The Hon. Randall Mitchell): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Over the period July 17, 2021, to January 31, 2022, a total of 46,596 persons visited Trinidad and Tobago; 46,227 persons visited Trinidad through the Piarco International Airport, while 369 persons visited Tobago through the ANR Robinson International Airport.

Madam Speaker: Member for Moruga/Tableland.

Ms. Benjamin: No supplementals, Madam Speaker.

Resurfacing Works in Barrackpore

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(Details of)

88. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Will the Minister indicate when resurfacing works on the following roads will commence and be completed:

- a. Rochard Douglas Road, Barrackpore;
- b. Cunjal North Road, Barrackpore; and
- c. Penal Rock Road in Moruga?

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Works and Transport.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, Rochard Douglas Road was prioritized for routine maintenance via patching work conducted by the Victoria East district of the Highways Division. Most recently, asphalt patching was done on March 10, 2022, and routine in-house patching has been scheduled fortnightly on this road. To supplement this exercise, this road was also identified for contractual spot-patching tentatively to be executed in June this fiscal year.

Cunjal North Road: as part of the Victoria East district routine maintenance plan, this road has undergone extensive in-house hot mix patching during the last three months where patching work was executed a total of eight times. To supplement this exercise, the road was also identified for contractual spot-patching tentatively to be executed in June of this fiscal year. It should also be noted as well that a failed-cylinder crossing along this road has just been replaced via contractual work. Final road reinstatement at this location will be executed this week.

Penal Rock Road: Routine in-house patching will continue to be undertaken on this road according to the maintenance schedule proposed by the Victoria East

district. This road was also identified for contractual spot-patching tentatively to be executed in May of this fiscal year. I thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Moruga/Tableland.

Ms. Benjamin: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, given the Minister's answer, can the Minister indicate if any of the roads named here would be put on any future road-work programmes with regard to paving?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, we do have major road-paving activities now taking place across the country. However, work has to be prioritized and based on the funding available, work will be executed as and when necessary. However, in the Moruga area a lot of road works are being undertaken and just—if I can just identify for the Member of Parliament in the Moruga area, we are doing a \$178 million project for upgrade. We have so far a slope stabilization, 49, 45 completed, four ongoing. Construction of bridges, four completed, construction of culvert crossing 16, completed, repairs to culvert crossing, two completed. And in terms of road paving, 11.5 kilometre road rehabilitation utilizing cement stabilization and traditional methods have also been completed. So there is a lot of work going in the Moruga area. However, unfortunately we cannot pave all the roads in Trinidad and Tobago at the same time. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Moruga/Tableland.

Ms. Benjamin: No supplementals, no further supplementals, Madam Speaker.

**Moruga/Tableland Constituency
(Details of Commencement of Repair Works)**

90. Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*) asked the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government:

Will the Minister provide the commencement date for repair works to the following roads in the Moruga/Tableland constituency:

- a. Diamond Road, St. Croix, Princes Town;
- b. Sahadath Road, Princes Town;
- c. Third Company, Indian Walk; and
- d. Perry Young Road, Indian Walk?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Rural Development and Local Government.

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in answer to question 90, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government has received information from the Princes Town Regional Corporation on the need for road repair works at Diamond Road, Saint Croix, Princes Town, Sahadath Road also in Princes Town, Third Company Indian Walk and Perry Road, Indian Walk.

The engineering unit of the Ministry has already conducted the preliminary site investigations on these roads and sites and these projects for repair are scheduled for commencement in 2022 subject to the availability of funds.

It is noteworthy that the Third Company Indian Walk landslip was only, in fact, reported to the Ministry on February 14, 2022, by the Princes Town Regional Corporation. That is quite anomalous. The factor for that is that, the engineering investigations of that landslip obviously are still ongoing but being treated with urgency. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Moruga/Tableland.

Ms. Benjamin: No supplementals, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

**Phoenix Park Energy Marketing LLC
(Money Paid to Keyera Energy Incorporated)**

93. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

Will the Minister state the sum of money paid by Phoenix Park Energy Marketing LLC to Keyera Energy Incorporated to acquire a Natural Gas Liquid Terminal in Hull, Texas?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the terminal was purchased by Phoenix Park Energy Marketing LLC for the sum of US \$32 million which is consistent with the approval that was provided by the Cabinet and is based on less than its current value.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

**Petrotrin Refinery
(Status of Bids)**

94. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

Will the Minister provide an update on the status of any bid(s) for the Petrotrin Refinery?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the process with respect to the refinery is an ongoing one. The remaining four bidders have been given until the first week in April 2022 to complete the current due diligence that is being done and to submit revised proposals which will be further evaluated for the purpose of selecting a preferred bidder.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, a follow-up question. Is there a reason for a revised bidding or an update on their proposal that you just mentioned?

Hon. S. Young: Madam Speaker, I did not—can the Member repeat his question please?

Mr. Lee: Sorry. Minister, you said that the four bidders, they are doing a revised proposal. Is there any reason for a revised proposal given that they had submitted?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. S. Young: It is because the Government has made it abundantly clear that the mandate in our interest is in restarting the refinery at Pointe-a-Pierre.

Madam Speaker: Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Power Plants (Details of Megawatts Utilized)

- 95. Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities: Given that Trinidad and Tobago currently has three major power plants supplying electricity to the national electricity grid, will the Minister state:
- a. how many megawatts of electricity are being produced by these three plants; and
 - b. how many megawatts of electricity are being utilised?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Public Utilities.

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago—in Trinidad rather, there are four power plants operated by three independent power producers namely the Trinidad Generation Unlimited, TGU; the Power Generation Company of Trinidad and Tobago, PowerGen which has two plants, one at Point Lisas and the other at Penal; and ContourGlobal, Trinity Power Limited previously Trinity.

The independent power producers supply electricity to the Trinidad and

Tobago Electricity Commission under a take or pay power purchase agreement as follows: TGU, 720 megawatts; Trinity, 220 megawatts; PowerGen Point Lisas, 200.25 megawatts; PowerGen Point Lisas and Penal, 624 megawatts; total in Trinidad, 1,754.25 megawatts.

In Tobago, there are two electricity power-generating plants, the Cove Power Station and the Scarborough Power Station that are owned by T&TEC with the following daily capacity. The Cove Power Station, 84 megawatts; and the Scarborough Power Station, 4.5 megawatts; giving you a total in Tobago of 88.4 megawatts of electricity. T&TEC has advised that the daily demand for electricity varies from day-to-day with the highest daily system peak experienced over the last three years being 1,370 megawatts.

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva North.

Mr. Ratiram: Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the hon. Minister, can the Minister advise the cost or the dollar value of the electricity that is not utilized?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Public Utilities.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, I think the Member has a grave misunderstanding. The capacity to generate electricity is not electricity that you have so therefore you cannot ascribe a cost to the capacity to generate electricity. So I hope the Member is so guided.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Apparent Escalation in Gang Violence (Details of)

100. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

Will the Minister state why, despite the Anti-Gang Act, the Acting Police Commissioner stated in January 2022 that there 'appears to be an escalation in gang violence'?

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, according to information provided by the Commissioner of Police, the apparent escalation in gang violence is due in part to the death of a known gang leader in the latter part of 2021, which had deep ramifications in the criminal underworld. Among other things, this killing caused a fragmentation in the gang leadership and prompted attempts by other gangs to assume the operations of the particular gang to which he belonged and led. An alliance as well between conventional street gangs and persons hired by them to carry out violent crimes on their behalf including shootings, arson, extortion, kidnapping and murder.

Thirdly, a merger among gangs involving white collar crimes which include human trafficking, illegal quarrying and the illegal importation of firearms, ammunition and drugs into Trinidad and Tobago. To fight this persisting menace, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service has developed several crime-fighting strategies to accelerate the manner of policing and ultimately dismantle these criminal gangs. These include but are not limited to, curtailing access to guns and ammunitions. The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service's Homicide Bureau is actively engaged in removing guns from the streets through a target, two targeted law enforcement activities and enforcement monitoring. This includes expanding detection efforts at legal ports, as well as examining the operations of security firms, licenced gun dealer, legal firearm users, shooting ranges and firearm trainers. The focus on guns both legal and illegal is to prevent guns and

ammunitions from being accessed and used by criminals, Madam Speaker, as well as combating white collar crime, a major issue in Trinidad and Tobago.

The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service's Financial Investigative Bureau is proactively concentrating efforts on addressing financially motivated crime such as money laundering, unexplained wealth linked to illegal quarrying and the trade in guns and drugs. Redistribution of resources given that the Northern Division frequently records the highest crime rate, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service instituted a new measure in January of this year to treat with murders and violent crime. The measures involved, dividing the division into two, the Northern Division North and the Northern Division North Central with a senior superintendent leading each of these subdivisions. This measure is expected to support a more targeted approach to crime and violence in those areas including, of course, gang violence.

Continuing efforts to infiltrate communities, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service continues to work together with communities to capture and/or deter those bent on distressing law-abiding citizens. For example, yesterday, Madam—or a couple hours ago—day before yesterday—four of five escaped inmates were recaptured with the help of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. So, engagement with the communities is critical—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—Madam Speaker, and we thank the public and the public-spirited among us for these efforts. But, Madam Speaker, as said, to this end the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service's community-oriented policing initiative and police youth clubs are intended to increase community engagement efforts and thereby reduce the likelihood of young people being wrongly influenced and making themselves accessible to gangsters and those who are criminally minded in the

society.

In addition, Madam Speaker, on the operational level, several specialized sections of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service are now heavily involved in communities identified to be challenged with criminal or gang activities. Deepening regional and international coordination efforts. Madam Speaker, most of the crimes that threaten us and create trauma in this society are not with origins necessarily in Trinidad and Tobago. There is a severe and serious international element to this. And in this regard the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service continues to work closely with our regional and international partners to strengthen approaches to deal with gangs operating within our borders. This includes sharing and receiving data on organized crime activities particularly as it relates to stolen vessels, wanted persons, drug seizures, identity documents and forensic evidence.

And, Madam Speaker, to assist the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service in this regard, the Government through the Ministry and the Minister of National Security will continue to invest the necessary resources into equipping law enforcement agencies—

Madam Speaker: Minister—

Hon. F. Hinds: My lady.

Madam Speaker:—your speaking time is now spent.

Hon. F. Hinds: I am obliged, Madam Speaker. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: Supplemental, Madam Speaker. The Minister has identified a plethora of challenges relating to gangs. Can he tell us precisely how the Anti-Gang Act is working to lessen the effect of gangs in crime in Trinidad and

Tobago?

Hon. F. Hinds: That is rather a banal question. No surprise from the Member for Naparima. We have a murder—we have the Offences Against the Person Act which prescribes what is murder and the sentences there from and the sentence there from and we still are afflicted with that problem like every other country in the world. Laws are there to be enforced. There are specific provisions that create criminal offences, and enforcement is what will give life and effect to those laws.

Madam Speaker, I do not know what the Member is speaking about. He wants to know specifically the impact of the anti-gang law. All I can tell him is that in its original form, which we supported, the gangsters had become afraid of it and it was far more effective. The UNC forced us to pass in a watered-down version of that law. It is in effect and the police are using it optimally and making great progress to the extent that within recent weeks persons were arrested and charged under that very anti-gang law in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Can the Minister indicate to this honourable House, how many persons have been convicted under the Anti-Gang Act?

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan, I will not allow that as a supplemental question based on the question asked and the answers. Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker, in order to then evaluate the effectiveness of the Anti-Gang Act, can the Minister indicate how many arrests have been made for the year thus far under the Anti-Gang Act?

Madam Speaker: Again, I will not allow that as a supplemental question based on

the question asked and the answers.

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

**Dredging of the Guaracara River
(Details of)**

101. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Given that residents of Reform, Williamsville and environs are affected yearly by flooding, will the Minister advise as to when the dredging of the Guaracara River will commence?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Works and Transport.

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the recently completed strategic drainage plan of the Ministry of Works and Transport outlines plans for structural and non-structural measures in Trinidad. There are no recent studies for the area of Reform, Williamsville and environs. The Drainage Division has executed and cleaned the Guaracara River and its tributaries in previous years. Unplanned development, illegal dumping of waste, encroachment of the channel and unmanaged filling of low-lying areas are some of the issues that have drastically affected and reduced the capacity of the main channels in this area, example, Reform, Williamsville and environs. This has hindered access in some areas that require cleaning and possibly widening of the river to increase its capacity. In the short-term various de-silting projects have taken place in this catchment.

Also, the development of a design and tender documents the project flood reduction work in the Guaracara River is ongoing. This tender is expected to be completed in the third quarter of this financial year pending receipt of all approval. Proposed works are expected to begin by the end of this fiscal year. A study of the

Guaracara River catchment is planned for the near future to establish various areas where further flooding mitigation solutions can be implemented. I thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

**Deposits Made to the HSF
(Details of)**

102. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

Given the requirement under section 13 of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act, that when revenues exceed 10 per cent of the budgeted estimates for a quarter, it must be deposited in the HSF by the end of the next month, will the Minister state the value of deposits made to the HSF as at January 31, 2022, for the quarter October 01, 2021 to December 31, 2021?

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Energy and Energy Industries.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, I will answer that question.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance?

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, Madam.

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Section 13(1) of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund Act states as follows.

“Where petroleum revenues collected in each quarter of any financial year—

- (a) exceed the estimated petroleum revenues for that quarter of the financial year by more than ten per cent, the currency of the United States of America equivalent of the excess revenue shall be withdrawn from the Consolidated Fund and deposited to the Fund...”

Accordingly, in view the fact that the actual revenues from petroleum for the first quarter of fiscal 2022 were less than the estimated receipts, no deposits could

be made to the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Act.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Minister of Finance, the total budgeted petroleum revenues for the financial year 2022 was 12.6 billion which works out approximately to 3.15 billion per quarter. Central Bank data tells us that the actual energy revenue—

Madam Speaker: Member, can you ask a question?

Mr. Charles: Yes.

Madam Speaker: The preamble is too long.

Mr. Charles: All right. Madam Speaker, our—or based on the Minister's statements and the Central Bank reports, the excess was 1.22 billion; that ought to have been deposited.

Madam Speaker: Member, is that a question or statement?

Mr. Charles: Okay. Why has 1.227 billion not been deposited, given the records of receipts by the Government for energy revenues?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

11.00 a.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: Madam Speaker, this is something I struggle with all the time. The inability of the Opposition to do proper research, to understand the law—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—to make proper calculation. In this particular case the Member for Naparima does not even understand the meaning of the term “revenues from petroleum”.

Hon. Member: Correct.

Hon. C. Imbert: I would advise the hon. Member, go and do some homework and come back before you ask another question like that, which is misguided,

inaccurate, wrong and politically foolish.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: The Central Bank report tells us that the revenue was 4.3 billion.

Hon. Member: Question! What is the question?

Mr. Charles: The question—

Madam Speaker: Member, do you have a question?

Mr. Charles: Yes. The Minister is misadvising the population, and that—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Mayaro. Member for Mayaro.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

**Research and Development Facility
(Breakdown for Fiscal 2020)**

105. Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Trade and Industry:

With regard to the funding provided to the Research and Development Facility for the non-energy, manufacturing and service sectors, will the Minister provide the House with a breakdown of the following for fiscal 2020:

- a) the number of grants created by said facility; and
- b) the names of the businesses that directly benefitted from said funding?

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, I am answering on behalf of the Minister of Trade and Industry. [*Interruption*] If I could ever find—

Thank you. On behalf of the Minister of Trade and Industry, Madam Speaker, for fiscal 2020, October 01, 2019 to September 30, 2020, three grants were approved through the research and development facility totalling \$466,382.50. And these were as follows:

- (1) \$155,000 for the development of vegan milk substitute for sale, and the use in new vegan local chocolate products.
- (2) \$251,800 for the development of two new hydroponic models of the smart auto-grow systems used to grow tomatoes, cut flowers, strawberries and mushrooms.
- (3) \$59,582.50 for the creation of four new stock-keeping units of Akal Chai Rum using proprietary blending and ageing techniques.

Madam Speaker, the three businesses that directly benefitted from that funding in fiscal 2020 were: Cocoa Republic Limited, \$155,000; Cube Root Hydroponic Farms Limited, \$258,800 and Snacks Luxury Group Limited, \$59,582.80. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Paray: Thank you very much. Minister, can you say whether any of these companies were able to successfully navigate any foreign investments based on the grants for their technology improvements?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, these companies were already in the process of moving into the foreign markets, and as such these grants assisted them in improving their technology, and they are moving in that direction very assiduously, Madam Speaker.

Omicron Variant (Efficacy of Cloth Masks)

106. Dr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Dr. Rai Ragbir (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Will the Minister advise this House on the efficacy of cloth masks against the new Omicron Variant?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The efficacy of cloth mask is variable and dependent on the following:

- (1) The number of layers used;
- (2) The type of fabric used;
- (3) The size in relation to fit. This is important to ensure that there is minimal gaps between the mask and the face to prevent entry of pathogens; and
- (4) The condition of mask during its use and its degree of dampness.

With respect to the Omicron variant of concern, which is a relatively new variant that was first reported to the WHO from South Africa, November 24, 2021. The main mode of transmission is droplets and/or aerosolization. In general, the greater number of layers the greater the prevention of pathogens passing through the mask. A mask with at least three layers will offer protection, and other types of masks that are surgical and N95s are usually utilized when there is increased likelihood of aerosolization. Example, during dental procedures, nasopharyngeal swabbing, intubation and nebulization as required during asthma attacks. The Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago's policy position of mask wearing for COVID-19 is guided by the policies and guidelines issued by the WHO. On January 05, 2022, the WHO issued an update where three masks are recommended:

1. Reusable non-medical masks which comply with the ASTM F3502 standard. The uniquely designed mask for protection against aerosols not just airborne droplets;
2. Disposable medical masks which comply with medical mask standards EN14683 Type I and the ASTM F2100 Level one. The standards that cover the performance requirements and test methods for material used to construct medical face masks for high-risk environments aerosol generating procedures; and

3. Other types of well-fitting non-medical masks, including homemade multi-layered masks are an acceptable option that has a high degree of filtration, breathability and fit.

The above mask-wearing guidelines should be synergistically used with other public health measures such as: vaccinations, social distancing, washing of hands and frequent sanitization that offers adequate protection against the COVID-19 virus and its variants of concern for our citizens. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Dr. Bodoë: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Minister, can you indicate whether there is consideration for review of wearing mask in public spaces? Is that being considered in the near future?

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad, regrettably I cannot allow that as a supplemental question based on the question asked and the answer. Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Seecheran: Madam Speaker, I had a supplemental question to the Minister of Health.

Madam Speaker: I am sorry.

Dr. Seecheran: Yes.

Madam Speaker: I am very sorry. You may ask your question.

Dr. Seecheran: Okay. Minister, would you recommend to the general public the use of cloth mask to prevent the transmission of the Omicron variant?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, let me reiterate what was said, apparently the Member did not hear it. Item No. 3 under January 05, 2022, World Health Organization recommendation. Item No. 3 said, and I re-quote:

Other types of well-fitting non-medical masks, including homemade multi-layered masks are an acceptable option that have a high degree of filtration,

breathability and fit.

So in the absence of medical masks, N95, WHO recommends that. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

**Caroni River
(Commencement of Works)**

111. Mr. Rishad Seecheran (*Caroni East*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Will the Minister inform the House when dredging and bank reinforcement works will commence on the Caroni River?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Works and Transport has embarked upon a multipronged approach to mitigating flooding in the Caroni River catchment and other catchment areas across Trinidad. Unplanned development, illegal dumping of unwanted waste, encroachment of the channels, unmanaged filling of low-lying areas and illegal removal of river embankment by private citizens are some of the causes of flooding. A study was undertaken in the Caroni River Basin and a strategic drainage plan was developed to outline plans for structural and non-structural measures to mitigate flooding in Trinidad. This plan prioritized work in the short, medium and long-term categories from previous studied areas.

Thus far, the Ministry has reinstated over 5 kilometres of embankment and continue to rehabilitate recent slippages. The most current work has been undertaken through a desilting programme. Further emergency projects are planned for the La Paille, Kelly Albert Trace and Caroni area in this fiscal year. At present, designs are being reviewed and updated for other areas on the Caroni River. The dredging of works on the Caroni River requires a number of approvals which are in progress. The draft tender document design and CEC applications

were completed and are being reviewed by the Drainage Division. This review is expected to be completed by the end of March 2022.

Dr. Seecheran: Thank you, Minister. Could you state if the dredging and desilting work will be completed before the start of the rainy season?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, desilting work forms part of a desilting programme, which is ongoing. It is an ongoing programme. However, dredging work is totally different. Dredging work requires several approvals, like CEC approvals and so. It is a big difference between dredging and desilting. What we are undergoing right now is desilting. And yes, there are parts of the Caroni River that is being included in this year's desilting programme.

EXPIRATION OF QUESTION TIME

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, question time is now spent based on Standing Order 29(10). The Whip has signified that the questions that have not been answered would be postponed for the next sitting. And also I wish to advise hon. Members that questions 61 and 79 have been deferred for two weeks.

Question time having expired, the following questions (112, 113, 114, 115 and 116) were not dealt with):

Bridge at Hercules Trace, Ravine Sable (Commencement of Works)

112. Will the hon. Minister of Works and Transport inform the House when remedial works will commence on the bridge located at Hercules Trace, Ravine Sable? [*Dr. R. Seecheran*]

Supermarket Association of Trinidad and Tobago (Consideration of Automated System Request)

113. Will the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services state whether the request of the Supermarket Association of Trinidad and Tobago for an automated system for government assistance will be considered? [*Ms.*

V. Mohit]

**Complementing in-person Classes with Online Sessions
(Measures to assist Schools)**

- 114.** Will the hon. Minister of Education indicate what measures have been implemented to assist schools that are unable to complement in-person classes with online sessions? [*Ms. A. Haynes*]

**Rotation of in-person Classes
(Monitoring and Evaluation Protocols for)**

- 115.** Will the hon. Minister of Education indicate what monitoring and evaluation protocols are in place to evaluate the performance of schools with the rotation of in-person classes? [*Ms. A. Haynes*]

**Adjustment to School Curriculum
(Details of)**

- 116.** Will the hon. Minister of Education indicate whether there has been any adjustment to the curriculum to ensure complete delivery within the school year? [*Ms. A. Haynes*]

**STATEMENT BY MINISTER
Extension on Administrative Moratorium
(Implementation of Health Warnings on Tobacco Products)**

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Health.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, and good morning again. I have been authorized by the Cabinet to make the following statement in my name.

Madam Speaker, as a matter of information, section 24(1) of the Tobacco Control Act, Chap. 30:01 mandates that all tobacco products shall contain permanently affixed on their packages, messages as prescribed by the Regulations. The Tobacco Control Regulations mandate specific packaging and labelling

requirements as well as the display of health messages, pictorial and text, on tobacco product packs and cartons.

You will recall, Madam Speaker, that the Tobacco Control (Amdt.) Regulations, 2019, which amendment allows for the use of 16 health messages and images contained in the Caricom Regional Organization for Standards and Quality database, of which Jamaica is the custodian, was approved in the Senate on February 09, 2021, and in the House of Representatives on February 12, 2021. The Resolution approving the Tobacco Control (Amdt.) Regulations, 2019, was published in the *Trinidad and Tobago Gazette* on February 21, 2021.

You may further recall, Madam Speaker, that when the Tobacco Control (Amdt.) Regulations, 2019, were first laid in the Senate, I had indicated that the same would come into effect one year after it had been approved and the health messages had been provided to the tobacco industry. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Health understands that this administrative moratorium was implemented by the postponement, by the Parliament, of the publication and bringing into force of the Tobacco Control (Amdt.) Regulations, 2019. It is material to note, Madam Speaker, that as at March 25, 2021, the Tobacco Control Unit, Ministry of Health, had substantively completed its handover of the health messages to the tobacco industry. As such, the administrative moratorium for the implementation of the health messages on tobacco products by the tobacco industry expires with effect from March 25, 2022.

Since the handover of the health messages to the tobacco industry, the Tobacco Control Unit, Ministry of Health, has overseen the process of ensuring that samples of the health messages on the tobacco product packages are compliant before being placed on the local market. To date, the status of these approvals and brands on the market are as follows:

- Of the 23 tobacco companies licensed with the Ministry of Health, 18 companies have submitted their sample packages and/or labels and received approval from the Ministry of Health for use thereof.
- The Ministry of Health has approved packages and/or labels for a total of 81 tobacco brands.
- There are only three tobacco brands on the market reflecting the approved packages or labels. The three tobacco brands are carried by five of the tobacco companies.

However, despite 18 of the 23 companies having acquired the necessary approvals, of recent note the Ministry of Health has been in receipt of a number of requests from the tobacco industry for an extension of the administrative moratorium, citing the COVID-19 global pandemic and related supply chain and logistical issues associated therewith in terms of the procurement and availability of packaging materials in order to comply.

Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Health has carefully considered the requests of the tobacco industry for an extension of the administrative moratorium and is of the view that there is merit to the same and that it would be reasonable to grant an extension of six months thereto. As such, Madam Speaker, I wish to advise that the Ministry of Health has agreed to an extension of the administrative moratorium for the implementation of the health messages on tobacco products by the tobacco industry and the consequent publication, by the Parliament, and coming into force of the Tobacco Control (Amdt.) Regulations, 2019, with effect from Monday 26th September, 2022. I thank you very much.

ADJUSTMENT OF SPEAKING TIME

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, with regard to

the resolution of the House moved on Wednesday, September 15, 2021 to amend the speaking time during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, I beg to move that the speaking time be adjusted as follows: the mover and first responder a maximum of 45 minutes; all other speakers a maximum of 30 minutes; and the mover in reply a maximum of 30 minutes; all with no extension.

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Speaker: Member for Arouca/Maloney.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE REPORT

Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020 (Adoption)

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I was getting a little nervous because I did not even hear one desk thumping when you called my name.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you very much. Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing in my name:

Be it resolved that this House adopt the Report of the Joint Select Committee on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020.

Madam Speaker, it is indeed for me an honour to move this report of the Joint Select Committee on a Bill entitled, Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020. In moving this Motion I am grateful for the privilege to have served on the Committee, and really, Madam Speaker, it would be remiss of me if I did not pay special tribute to my former Cabinet colleague Sen. The Hon. Clarence Rambharat who chaired this Committee.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, on behalf of those of us on this side, I thank him for his patience, his guidance and overall for his sterling contribution to the development of this piece of legislation, and to so many other pieces of legislation. Certainly we on this side wish him the abundance of God's blessings as he re-joins his family.

Madam Speaker, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020, was introduced and read a first time in the House of Representatives on October 14, 2020, and was committed to a Joint Select Committee on the same day. Pursuant to resolutions of the House of Representatives on Monday, November 09, 2020, and of the Senate on Tuesday, November 17, 2020, a Joint Select Committee was established to consider and report on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, and was empowered to consider and report on the general merits and principles of the Bill, and report by Thursday, December 31, 2020. The committee also given the opportunity to utilize the information that came from the Eleventh Parliament where there was also a Joint Select Committee similar in nature.

Madam Speaker, that report, which is before us today, for consideration was signed by all parties, including the Independent Senators, but not by the Members of the Opposition, who tabled a minority report. I must confess that at first I was a bit unclear as to the justification for the points of departure in that Minority Report, Madam Speaker. And the points of departure were, and I quote:

“The Members of the Opposition take note of the Draft Final Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Government Reform dated June 30th, 2021, and wish to record the differing views, including:

- The creation of an Executive Council excludes the voice of the

minority.”

Madam Speaker, of course, it would. An Executive Council is made up of those who form the Executive and not the minority who formed the Opposition.

- “- The Opposition disagrees with Property Tax being implemented at this time;
- There are no provisions for equity in population, geographic size and allocation of resources to each Municipality”

The Bill introduces the protection of workers by recognizing—sorry.

- “- The Bill reduces the protection of workers by recognized majority unions.”

Not so, Madam Speaker. And:

- “- Insufficient consultation with stakeholders”

—which, Madam Speaker, is always their mantra. But as I go through my presentation, Madam Speaker, you will see that this is very far from the truth.

So, Madam Speaker, as I said I was a bit unclear as to the justification for their points of departure. However, if nothing else, last week showed us and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago that my colleagues on the opposite side do not truly understand and appreciate the role and function of local government. Imagine, Madam Speaker, a senior member of the Opposition who would go on record to say that local government is only about CEPEP and stray dogs. Imagine, Madam Speaker, if that was not bad enough, the Leader of the Opposition described local government as, and I quote:

Just getting your drains clean and the la basse people.

Can you believe that, Madam Speaker? And imagine the Leader of the Opposition was once an alderman in the St. Patrick County Council. Madam Speaker, I would like to say that there is value in all honest work, and we on this side distance

ourselves from any attempt to disparage those persons whose job it is to clean our drains or sweep our streets.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, that work is necessary to keep our country clean. That work is necessary to prevent flooding, flooding which the same Opposition complains about perennially.

Madam Speaker, I wish to place on the public record the written comments of the Chairman of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation and the Chief Executive Officer of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. Both of those corporations are controlled by the Opposition. In the case of the Sangre Grande Corporation's Chairman Anil Juteram, in written correspondence to the Joint Select Committee stated, and I quote:

“We peruse the updated amendment on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill 2020, and considered all changes. We look forward to working with it when it is approved in the Parliament.”

And for Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, and I quote:

“Please be informed that the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill...”—are in favour—we are in favour of what the Bill has to say.

Juxtapose those comments with what the Opposition's Minority Report said, Madam Speaker. And I simply ask that—that Minority Report continues to make no sense.

Madam Speaker, your committee held six meetings, and we received written comments from 22 of the 27 key stakeholders identified by the committee. Written comments were received from all 14 existing regional and municipal corporations, as well as from the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation,

as it then was; the Ministry of Planning and Development, the Statutory Authorities Service Commission, the National Insurance Board of Trinidad and Tobago, the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Local Government Authorities (TTALGA), WASA, the Auditor General's Department and the Ministry of Works and Transport.

And, Madam Speaker, even before those comments and reports, we had also received comments and reports which we took into consideration from the Eleventh Parliament, and there were over 25 stakeholders who commented or reported, including the municipal police, the three trade unions, that is Amalgamated Workers' Union, the National Union of Government and Federated Workers, the Contractors and General Workers Trade Unions, seven Chambers of Commerce, including the San Fernando area chamber, Chaguanas Chamber, Cunupia Chamber, Tunapuna Chamber of Industry and Commerce, seven business associations including the Felicity Business Development Association, the Port of Spain Downtown Owners and Merchants Association, Princes Town, Arima, Chaguanas, Cunupia, eight vendors and business associations, and the list goes on, Madam Speaker.

11.30 a.m.

Madam Speaker, you will find appended to your report a summary of the committee's work: the minutes of meetings; key stakeholder submissions; a stakeholder matrix; a list of amendments to the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill; a consolidated version of the Bill; and the minority report; and all of these are available on the Parliament's website. And so I invite members of the public to look at the entire documentation.

Madam Speaker, in all honesty, local government reform is far from being a novel concept. Over the years the People's National Movement has made

commitment to bring meaningful reform to local government and, Madam Speaker, that is why today I am proud to make this commitment of the PNM a reality.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: This Diego Martin West, Rowley-led administration has a vision of local government, a vision that fosters the delivery of goods and services to burgesses in an effective and efficient manner.

Madam Speaker, analyses have revealed that the major impediments affecting local government bodies include, but are not limited to: inadequate funding; inadequacy of the current legislation; sluggish administrative structure; unnecessary bureaucracy; lack of productivity; and interference and manipulation. I therefore crave your indulgence, Madam Speaker, and that of my honourable colleagues to revisit several attempts at local government reform.

Madam Speaker, the first attempt at local government reform began in 1927 and that Act, the Division of Trinidad Act divided the Island of Trinidad into eight Counties which were further subdivided into Wards. Two decades later in 1945 county councils were established and that was six in Trinidad and one in Tobago. And that was based on the West Indian Royal Commission known as the Moyne Commission.

Madam Speaker, in 1965 the Sinanan Committee was appointed by Cabinet for the purpose of reappraising the existing system of local government in Trinidad and Tobago in the context of independence. And in that Sinanan Committee Report, it highlighted:

“...the need for a greater role and prominence of Local Government in...”—our—“democratic and development processes...decentralisation of key functions”—from central government—“to Local Government bodies; and

the empowerment of communities to play more meaningful roles in the management of their assets.”

Madam Speaker, as a result of the Sinanan Committee, its recommendations, the County Councils Act, No. 25 of 1967 redefined the roles and functions and consolidated the executive positions of the seven county councils. We did not stop there, Madam Speaker. In 1974 the Hugh Wooding Constitution Commission was appointed to examine constitutional reform at both the central and local government levels. The Commission made numerous far-reaching recommendations such as, the extension of local government boundaries, the expansion of local government bodies functional base and assigning local government bodies more authority with regard to the control of funds appropriated to local government by the Parliament.

In 1980 the local government was further reformed with the passage of the Tobago House of Assembly Act which was a major landmark as it brought a level of autonomy to the island of Tobago with the creation of the Tobago House of Assembly replacing the Tobago County Council. In 1983, a draft policy paper on community development and local government reform was published, which focused on involving local government bodies as partners towards national development. And that intention was to achieve strengthened community input in national policymaking.

Madam Speaker, the continuity between this 1983 draft policy paper with its emphasis on community involvement in development and the Sinanan Committee Report, emphasized empowering communities. Thereafter, in 1989 a draft local government reform policy paper was published which addressed decentralization, regional administration and development, and it served as the groundwork for the Municipal Corporations Act, 1990. The Act was meant to drive the transformation

of the local government bodies into autonomous financially self-sufficient, efficient and effective entities. The Municipal Corporations Act, No. 21 of 1990, proclaimed in 1991, consolidated all the available pieces of local government legislation, Madam Speaker. It created two cities, three boroughs, including the addition of the Borough of Chaguanas and 13 administrative regions. It also introduced the concept of corporate governance and extended local government functions to include the raising of revenue and an enhanced role in public service delivery.

Madam Speaker, despite this, the comprehensive transformation hoped for has been only partially achieved up to today. And so the following areas of concern still persist and I will outline what these areas of concern are: the need to strengthen citizens participation and understanding of local government issues; the fact that local government is heavily reliant on central government funding the archaic corporate structure and establishment including the governance structure of the councils; the absence of the required professional and administrative staff; the absence of sufficiently defined parameters for a mutually beneficial relationship between central and local government; service delivery that is not always in line with public expectations; the clear need to improve value for money offerings; the demarcation of municipal boundaries and ambiguities in legislation.

Madam Speaker, in 2002 as a consequence of these concerns, a series of public consultations were held throughout all municipalities and these consultations would form the basis for various policy documents in the ensuing years. Thus the “Draft White Paper on Local Government Reform 2006” was laid in the House of Representatives on May 26, 2006, and in the Senate on June 06, 2006. And this Draft White Paper emerged out of those 2002 public consultations. It contained a policy proposal for the restructuring of the system of local

government.

In 2008a Green Paper on the roles and responsibilities was produced and in 2009 the “Draft White Paper on Local Government Reform” was laid in the House of Representatives on July 3rd and this paper represented a major shift in Trinidad and Tobago’s local government systems. Its theme was:

“‘EMBRACING-ALL’

Local Government Reform in the context of the Vision 2020 charge towards sustainable local communities, robust participative democracy and Regional Planning and Development.”

Madam Speaker, despite all of this work, in 2010 there was a general election and a change in administration. And so that work stopped. However, in 2013, the “Draft White Paper on Local Government Transformation and Modernization” which sought to introduce elements of proportional representation in the election of aldermen was introduced and that subsists today.

Madam Speaker, the PNM under the astute leadership of the Member for Diego Martin West prioritized one of its key manifesto promises in its 2015 election campaign, and after winning office appointed the late Sen. Franklin Khan as Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to place the local government reform process at the forefront. And, Madam Speaker, I pay tribute to that, to the late Sen. Franklin Khan at this time for the work that he did.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: And, Madam Speaker, he went throughout the length and breadth of Trinidad to all municipal corporations and he also went to Tobago for one consultation. I also pay tribute to Sen. Kazim Hosein—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—a former Mayor of the City of San Fernando who took

over that ministerial portfolio and continued to spearhead the reform process.

Madam Speaker, from December 2015 to 2016, the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government conducted public consultations, as I said, in all the municipal corporations. And these consultations assisted in informing the preparation of the 2016 “Draft Policy on Local Government Reform”. In total, Madam Speaker, over 3,600 persons attended these consultations, over 300 questions and comments were recorded addressing issues ranging from human resource capacity, accountability, efficiency and politics in terms of the resolution of conflicts. This is the exercise that gave birth to the Bill that came to the House in 2019. And, Madam Speaker, as I said before in the Fourth Session of the Eleventh Parliament, that 2019 Bill was introduced and the Committee invited written submissions in its 15 meetings and met with 66 stakeholders. And that, Madam Speaker, is the backdrop against which this 2020 report and Bill are being presented to this honourable House today.

Your committee places before this honourable House therefore, the revised draft Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020, and your committee dares to say it is one of the most groundbreaking pieces of legislation that this country will ever have seen.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: As, Madam Speaker, it has the potential when it becomes law and is implemented, to completely and radically revolutionize the manner in which rural and local government operates. Madam Speaker, as far as possible it is unfortunate, and I must repeat that those who are in Opposition continue to try to taint these processes in which they participated freely, and, Madam Speaker, from the detailed historical overview that I have already presented, it ought to be pellucidly clear to the embattled Opposition and the

embattled Opposition Leader, that sufficient consultation has already taken place and that now is the time for action, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, it is troubling that the Opposition had every opportunity to come up with additional stakeholders whom they may have deemed necessary or to even come up with additional ideas in relation to this Bill. They did none of that, Madam Speaker, and then resorted to this nonsensical mantra of insufficient consultation. Madam Speaker, we reject that out of hand.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: But, Madam Speaker, one does not have to be a snake charmer to understand the language of serpents and therefore we categorically reject that accusation as dishonest, tactless and fact-less. Madam Speaker, very much like what this Government facilitated with the two Tobago autonomy Bills, this Bill and this report is first and foremost about bringing government closer to the people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Beyond the conflicting objectives and rationalities that engage Government and Opposition, I argue that citizenship may be defined as a constant negotiation of legitimacy between stakeholders never definitively trapped below or above the actual challenges of the central government and it is that space that local government reform now seeks to occupy.

Madam Speaker, allow me to point out from the report the critical features of this proposed legislation. And, Madam Speaker, while not perfect the existing functions of local government over the years have focused on several issues that have not brought everything to the fore and for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So, Madam Speaker, in its new dispensation as your committee has indicated the

functions of local government have been expanded to enhance the delivery of services to the burgesses of the corporations and it is noteworthy that these expanded functions are set out against a backdrop of people empowerment and by extension empowerment of communities.

Therefore, the Bill facilitates: local government bodies engaging in economic research and planning; monitoring and evaluating performance; creating and developing entrepreneurs; building relationships with civil society through citizen participation; and securing funding and accessing various income streams. In other words, Madam Speaker, the Bill allows local government bodies to determine their own destinies. Accordingly, the following functional areas of responsibility will be expanded: public health; municipal policing; spatial planning and building inspectorate; disaster management; repairs and maintenance to public buildings; and repairs and maintenance to cemeteries and crematorium. The additional areas of responsibility will include: secure funding, that is to say facilitating access to various income streams; social welfare services; management and repair of community centres; the development of small contractors from within the area of focus; civil society participation; economic research and planning; local government development units for each corporation; improved information and communication technology; and improved monitoring and evaluation of all local government services.

The benefits therefore to this reformed system of local government will be: secured funding; improved government; greater autonomy and accountability; the more effective and efficient delivery of services; balanced regional development; increased participation and involvement by the citizenry and civil society; more robust monitoring and evaluation to ensure value for money in the delivery and quality of services; and the increased local economic development and

sustainability of local communities.

Madam Speaker, in order to adequately address the concerns and questions raised by stakeholders, the committee caused, you committee caused a stakeholder comments matrix to be prepared and that is to be found in the committee's report and we noted the following considerations. Furthermore, Madam Speaker, your committee's proposed amendments contained in the Bill at Appendix V of the report took on board many, if not all of the concerns raised by the stakeholders and that is the amended Bill that is before this House today and it reflects the accommodations.

During the course of the consultations, Madam Speaker, stakeholders raised many concerns and wherever possible we did in fact act judiciously on those concerns. Twelve main areas were highlighted by stakeholders. There was the need for a clear definition of the role of the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Local Government Authorities distinguishing it as a consultative body and not a trade union. And so, clause 3(e), section 17(1) deals specifically with that. Concerns were raised with respect to the establishment of the organizational structure of municipalities under the proposed Bill and the role of the CEO in its establishment. Additionally, a generic structure for corporations was recommended with the municipal council being given the responsibility for additions to the structure to fit each corporation's needs.

So, Madam Speaker, this was a suggestion, that was made by the Ministry of Public Administration and it is a suggestion that was taken on board, because each corporation will have different needs and consequently they would need a specific structure to execute their programme.

Madam Speaker, we also amended the section 33H to ensure and to indicate that the organizational structure should be approved by the Minister of Finance. At

clause 3(q), section 35H, new subsection (2) there was a suggestion to rephrase the term “local cultural event” to reflect the terms used in 35H(a) as “local cultural community events” to ensure consistency throughout the document and the committee agreed to make that amendment.

A concern was raised as it relates to clause 3(q), section 35I(e) which looks at transferring responsibility for maintaining main and major roads from the Ministry of Works and Transport to local government. It was clear, Madam Speaker, that a clarification was needed to determine whether responsibility for all roads now included what are called orphan roads and non-vested roads. And now it would fit into the vesting of roadways, private roadways and orphan roads.

Madam Speaker, your committee agreed that this section should be amended to include orphan roads and agricultural roads, as well as to define what are orphan roads because, Madam Speaker, in many instances these so-called orphan roads are often left to the vagaries of whether a particular chairman or CEO wants to deal with the construction or repair of these roads. Your committee also agreed to consult with the Ministry of Works and Transport for the definition of orphan roads and explore a way to include a definition which would encompass private roads.

Madam Speaker, this connects with the overall issue of decentralizing government services and making these services more people-oriented. Your committee discussed the period of time a person in default should be granted before reporting to the Board of Inland Revenue. It was suggested that the time frame be consistent with that outlined in the Property Tax Act. However, the Act did not offer any period and as such it was suggested that the period be 14 to 21 days. And this is found at clause 3(ak), section 79(2).

Another concern raised was the need for the clarification of clause 3(d)(i) to

ensure that an alderman or councillor must be a resident of their municipality. The amendment finally agreed on, by your committee, was the removal of the requirement for the prospective councillor or alderman to own property in the electoral area. But in an electoral district other than the electoral district for which he seeks to be a candidate, the provisions would now provide that a person is not disqualified from being either an alderman or a councillor provided that that person still resides within the municipality.

Madam Speaker, of some concern was the issue in section 44 of the Bill which mandates that each council be required to establish an audit committee to, among other things, review the financial statements of the council, provide advice on the council's strategic management plan and the annual business plan and review the adequacy of the council's internal controls. These committees will therefore become embedded as an important part of local government's financial and governance performance measurement framework. This is essential, Madam Speaker, because we have seen from an investigation of some of the corporations that there are audit and financial issues. So there is now an assurance that financial transactions of the councils will be conducted properly and in accordance with law.

Madam Speaker, the reforms considered by your committee aim to transform local government. This report ensures that the devolution of authority is designed solely to improve efficiency, responsiveness and effectiveness in the delivery, accessibility and sustainable of public goods and services. The transformed local government system will put the power in the hands of the people to effect change in their own communities. This, Madam Speaker, we contend will strengthen democracy which is the very essence of our business—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—in this House. Madam Speaker, one of the essential

features of this Bill, and your committee looked at this very closely, was the introduction of the Executive Council model. And it is contemplated that in addition to the Municipal Council each Mayor or Chairman will be afforded the opportunity to select an Executive Council from amongst nominated and elected members of council. And the Executive Council will comprise not fewer than five members and not more than eight full-time members including the Mayor, the Deputy Mayor and such other Councillors or Aldermen not being more than six, who will be assigned the responsibility for any of the functions of a division of the corporation. Madam Speaker, this will be a major change.

Madam Speaker, one of the key fundamental changes is the delivery or enactment of the long awaited reform which will transition regional corporations into autonomous bodies similar to the Tobago House of Assembly. And that is at section 33 of the Bill. And we are contending, your committee contends that this decentralization will strengthen the principles of transparency and accountability and these corporations will now report directly to the Ministry of Finance.

Madam Speaker, these are fundamental changes which your committee has brought in its report. The fundamental changes with a key focus on decentralization, reform of the local government system totally and your committee is of the firm view that this is the fostering of fresh thinking on how to best implement this process. It will be a move away from the technocratic approach in favour of support strategies. It will be a move away from traditional concerns with functional and fiscal reassignments to a broader definition of decentralization as empowerment of people through empowerment of their local government.

It is a move, Madam Speaker, to have a specific mandate to help implement national policies as local government would be seen as a branch of central

government and a general mandate to promote local development in an autonomous and accountable way as political representatives of the community of citizens. The expected benefit therefore is not only allocated efficiency, but, Madam Speaker, it is an opportunity to mobilize additional resources at the local level.

Madam Speaker, my colleagues on this side of the aisle, particularly the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government will elucidate further on several other aspects of the report and the Bill, but, Madam Speaker, local government authorities face challenges in the delivery of goods and services and what this, your committee has recognized is that it is now is the time to ensure that major obstacles such as inadequate funding, inefficient administrative structure, which have hindered the progress of the local government are removed and we move to a position where local government is at the forefront and communities and politicians who are elected to serve in these municipalities in fact do what they have been tasked to do and can achieve success at all levels of these communities.

12.00 noon

Madam Speaker, today we have come here, your committee is mandated and your committee's report is intended to strengthen our local government system and bring some relief to the various challenges that local government and the people of Trinidad and Tobago in these municipalities have faced.

Madam Speaker, I take this opportunity to thank and place on record your committee's thanks for the scores of submissions, inputs, contributions, guidance and suggestions we received, both in the Eleventh and in this Twelfth Parliament. Those contributions, whether we agreed with them or not, have helped to ensure that we as a committee produced a Bill that places local government where it rightly belongs and, Madam Speaker, that is at the centre of people's development

and at the centre of the communities' development.

Madam Speaker, so fundamental are the changes proffered in this Bill, that it is reasonable to describe this parliamentary exercise as giving local government a propeller into the future.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, the devolution of an authority will transform the landscape of local government. Madam Speaker, your committee conducted its work in a spirit of comradery, collegiality and cooperation. No view was silenced and where there were differing views, Madam Speaker, Members agreed to respectfully disagree. That notwithstanding, Madam Speaker, I again note the Minority Report and suffice it to say that it is unclear as to the justification for the points of departure but, Madam Speaker, enough said on that.

Madam Speaker, my colleagues on this side wish to place on record that we commend this report to the House. We also wish to indicate that today we in the PNM fulfil yet another one of our campaign promises to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and continue the work of building a new society according to the Member for Diego Martin West, the political leader of the PNM and the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. This Rowley Government has done the work that it was elected to do and, Madam Speaker, I commit the committee's report to this House. I thank you and I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: I remind the responder that the responder has 45 minutes with no extension. Member for St. Augustine.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Khadijah Ameen (*St. Augustine*): Madam Speaker, I want to thank you for

recognizing me to lead off the Opposition's response in this debate on the Joint Select Committee Report on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill before us. Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago could tell when a local government election is due because it is the only time that the PNM pays any attention to local government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Outside of that it is mamaguy and neglect. And I do agree that the Government has met its mandate for local government reform if its mandate is to mamaguy the population—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—because that is what the Government has been doing when it comes to local government.

Madam Speaker, the mover of the Motion mentioned a history in terms—gave a history in terms of major reforms of local government legislation in Trinidad and Tobago. But I want to put on the record that the major reforms in local government in this country were never done by the PNM Government. Successive governments failed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: In 1990, in 1992, in 1986, the PNM was not the mover of those major legislations. In 2013, when proportional representation was introduced for the first time, it was done by a Kamla Persad-Bissessar government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And in addition to that, it is not only legislative changes. In 2010—2015, the government of Kamla Persad-Bissessar had an all government approach to local government empowerment and it was the first time corporations councillors had offices, had secretaries.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: They had VAT exemptions for their vehicles. Today councillors are being evicted from their offices because they cannot pay the rent because of Government's lack of releasing funds. So, while the Members on the other side will talk about their White Paper in 2006, the Green Paper in 2008, the Draft White Paper in 2009, the question to you, all those talks and consultations and writing of papers, it resulted to zero because you paid no focus on local government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The Member for Arouca/Maloney, in moving the Motion, referred to the Minority Report in which the Opposition stated, it will not support property tax at this time. Madam Speaker, this Bill is one of the tools that this Government appears to want to use to implement the dreaded property tax. And we in the Opposition maintain that we will not support any measures to bring any new taxes, to bring property tax at all to the population in this time when people are recovering from the hardships of the COVID pandemic and many are still jobless.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Arouca/Maloney also tried to suggest that Opposition Members were relegating local government bodies to dealing with rats and garbage alone. But the truth is that regional corporations have been saddled with an influx of rodents, thanks to this PNM Government. They have been saddled with garbage pile-ups and box drains collapsing because of the neglect of this Government. And because of that, regional corporations, our esteemed councillors, aldermen and chairmen, have had to focus on and grapple with these issues rather than dealing with local government, for instance, promoting inclusiveness and equitable approach to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals; to local economic development, which is a critical component of the mandates of local governments throughout the world.

The fact that the Government has allowed roads in this country to get so bad that an ambulance trying to reach a home on fire in Princes Town could not reach and two persons died, much less for access to, for instance, local tourism sites, points out how local government is being impacted by the absolute neglect of this Government. Local Government is the arm of government that is closest to people. The action or inaction, in this case, the performance or the failure to perform of almost every Government Ministry impacts on local government and regional corporations directly and indirectly in many ways.

So while this 327-page Joint Select Committee Report as well as the miscellaneous Bill makes a demand for certain measures and amends Acts that primarily fall under various Ministries—for example, this Bill amends the WASA Act with regard to the planning and approval aspect. But the truth is that the performance of WASA affects local government in more ways outside of the planning. So, when WASA fails to delivery water and the regional corporations are forced to use their minute water trucking vote towards bringing relief to communities, that impacts on local government performance. When T&TEC neglects their duty when it comes to the management and the maintenance of lights on sporting facilities, recreational grounds, parks, public spaces, the non-performance of this Minister of Public Utilities has had an impact on local government.

The JSC Report, Madam Speaker, also touches on the role of the Ministry of Works and Transport, for example, when it comes to major roadways, as the mover of the Motion mentioned. We also have to consider the watercourses and so on, and the truth is that the performance of a government, as we saw in 2010—2015, brought about tremendous relief and support to local government compared to the neglect that is happening now. So, the failure of this Government to clear major

watercourses, to maintain pumps, the flood gates and the banks, the severe flooding that we have been seeing in this country, has an impact now on disaster response. The Disaster Management Unit is also examining the JSC Report and the administrative structure. The social aspect, in terms of providing support, social support, those things will be examined by my colleagues later on, but the failure continues.

Madam Speaker, the JSC discussed the maintenance of schools being assigned to regional corporations. The Municipal Corporations Act of 1990, gives corporations the responsibility to maintain public buildings, you know. But because the Government has failed to provide that funding and support, they have not been able to carry out that mandate over the years. But the assignment of the maintenance of schools recently, in this JSC as well as in the practical administration, and particularly because of the collapse of the EFCL under this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The recent announcement of the retrenchment of workers at the EFCL and the media reports—there is an *Express* article on March the 7th where the media reported a shutdown or a winding up of EFCL, a body that owes over \$600 million to contractors still. Perhaps, while the Minister of local government is contributing—or one of the Members opposite could clarify the impact of the shut of EFCL, the mandate to local government bodies, regional corporations to maintain schools and how you intend to treat with it.

So, while the Bill gives the regional corporations a mandate, the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development, during the time that the JSC was meeting, had actually already issued in writing instructions to these regional corporations to clean schools. But the abandonment of several schools that were

under construction as well also had an indirect impact. Because when the Government failed to complete those schools, when you have grass and vine growing up on these structures, the indirect effect, the rats, the snakes and all the other negative public health issues, impact on the surrounding communities. And so, later on my colleagues will examine what the failures of this Ministry have caused, the impact it has caused, on local government.

Madam Speaker, the JSC also examined the administrative structure of the regional corporations in several aspects, the appointment of contract positions and so on. And a key issue was, of course, the fact that staff members in regional corporations currently fall under two major bodies, the Statutory Authorities Service Commission and the Public Service Commission. And as mentioned by the mover of the Motion, that was looked at by the JSC. But you also have in this Bill the creation of contract positions at a time, Madam Speaker, when the Ministry of Labour, under this PNM Government, has been a failure through and through in the protection of the workers this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The Minister of Labour has failed to treat with salary negotiations. The workers in the regional corporations are currently on a 2013 salary. The question as to how this shift in the administrative structure will impact on industrial relations aspects, for example, will be examined comprehensively by the Opposition today because we continue to advocate for the protection of workers from the abuse of this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, the Member for Arouca/Maloney in piloting this Bill spoke to the point of orphan roads. Orphan roads have been an issue and I am happy that she expressed her appreciation of the impact orphan roads and orphaned

infrastructure has on regional corporations. Having recently been appointed as the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, perhaps the Member for Arouca/Maloney could pay particularly attention to one of the biggest culprits when it comes to orphan roads and orphaned infrastructure, and that is the HDC. Because the Government's failure, with respect to maintenance in HDC developments, in handing over developments, in doing what is required legally, has an impact on regional corporations.

As the Member for St. Augustine, in Oropune, where I represent, I know first-hand of what happens to residents when HDC fails. All the infrastructure, the roads, the parks, the recreational grounds, even the HDC has some commercial malls in some of those developments, and those facilities remain often orphaned, especially the older developments. Madam Speaker, the closure of Caroni (1975) Limited, the shutdown of Petrotrin, has also left a lot of infrastructure orphaned. And I want to say to the Government that it is not only roads that are orphaned, you have a lot of public spaces as well that have an impact on regional corporations and sometimes they intervene.

The Minister who moved the Motion tried to make it appear that, you know, it was left to the vagaries of the intervention of the chairman or CEO of that regional corporation, and I think that is perhaps an unkind way to put it. Because while the Government has neglected these spaces, they have also not provided the financing and the resources needed to do the work. So, how can you try to make the corporations—demonize the corporations today? The JSC Report spoke of orphan roads but it goes even further because we have seen the neglect by this Government.

Madam Speaker, the Opposition will also examine the recommendations of the JSC with regard to the power it gives to the Minister of Finance. This Bill gives

the Minister of Finance far-reaching powers and we in the Opposition will question and examine the principle of an elected politician having the power to determine salaries and benefits of other elected politicians which goes against the grain of good public administration. We do have a Salaries Review Commission. There is also a constitutional role for the Minister of Finance and section 37, I think it was of the Bill, dealt with the budget and the supplementary funding that comes under the power of the Minister of Finance which my colleagues will go into later on.

But what we have seen, Madam Speaker, under this Government, is the emergence of what I can only call financial abuse, where the Government brings a budget, this Parliament examines and approves a budget, but you have suppression of releases where the corporations are forced to be like a puppet on a string being played by the Minister of Finance and the Minister of local government as opposed to being autonomous as this Government boasts.

Madam Speaker, the salary of a councillor—it is not even “ah” salary, eh. It is a stipend. I heard a Member on the other side at a political meeting referring or saying that, you know—talking about councillors becoming full time and so on; something we can applaud but, at present, the stipend for a councillor is \$4,360. That is below minimum wage. So, it is an area, we do agree, has to be addressed. With regard to the funding, the Members have been in their political platform and in other spaces speaking about the set-up of an agency which will be allocated \$100 million and that agency will then disburse the funding to the regional corporations. So, this is an opportunity for the Government to confirm or clarify, when we are speaking about autonomy, where are you going with this agency that will apply another layer of democracy to bring the resources to the corporations.

Madam Speaker, the mover of the Motion spoke that the JSC considered the stakeholders’ input from the former Minister of Local Government and Rural

Development, the late Franklin Khan, in a series of what I call town meetings. I attended 10 out of those 14 consultations, as the Government termed it, but they were really town meetings. The public had no draft legislation to consider. The discussions were not even about the legislation and my colleagues will look at the JSC—sorry, the stakeholder engagements utilized in the JSC and the conduct of what this Government calls consultations. Because they boast of their consultations, they condemned us, but the truth is that these consultations were town meetings. They were political meetings. And in those meetings, the Minister at the time promised certain aspects of social welfare, for instance, support for disaster units, food cards, grants for the poor and the vulnerable, to be dealt with by local government. So, whereas the utterances made on those—I have to call them political platforms—have not become a reality, the truth is that you call them consultations but stakeholders really did not have an input on legislation.

Madam Speaker, the failure of the Ministry of community development that deals with the National Commission for Self Help, that has responsibilities when it comes to responding to disaster, also has an impact on what is discussed in the JSC in terms of the new responsibilities and structure of the Disaster Management Unit. What will be the impact going forward?

So this Government has—this House has to deliberate today on the JSC Report but it must also examine the contravention of the principles of standards—principles and standards in local government; the failure to provide responsive, responsible and accountable local government; the failure to adhere to democratic principles; the need for citizens to have sufficient knowledge and understanding of their rights and entitlements; the failure of the Government to adopt good governance. And there have been instances now, internationally, where, I think it was in South Africa in 2021, a regional corporation was taken to court.

“In April”—of 2021—“the South African High Court ordered...”—a—
“national government to intervene in the affairs of a municipality for the first
time.”

And:

“This intervention”—Madam Speaker— “was as a result of an ongoing
financial and service delivery crisis in the Lekwa local municipality in
Mpumalanga...”—in South Africa.

We in Trinidad and Tobago have to take this most explicit lesson that has
been learned, in that, where municipalities fail to heed the call of their
communities and provinces fail to act in addressing municipal dysfunctionality in a
timely and appropriate manner, the courts can now have recourse. And because of
the failure of this Government to provide the corporations with the resources to
carry out their legal mandate, they open the regional corporations up to
intervention by the court. So, it is a very serious thing.

Madam Speaker, the Government has spoken about, in the JSC Report,
about existing policies and I want to question the status of these policies. These
policies, in many cases, exist on paper but, again, because the regional
corporations are busy grappling with the rats and garbage that come out of this
Government’s neglect, it has not had time to focus on the National Urban Policy,
the draft national development policy, procurement legislation. This Government
has been talking about ICT usage in service delivery and citizen engagement. What
services are you delivering via ICT when you have no resources or lack of
resources to regional corporations? Many cases they cannot provide the services.
Why are you promising now to provide these services through ICT means?

There are very few services being delivered. So, to come and put forward a
policy for ICT delivery means that you must get delivery first. Madam Speaker, the

Joint Select Committee—I want to take this opportunity because in the Eleventh Parliament, when I was in the Senate, I was a Member of the Joint Select Committee, I want to take this opportunity to commend Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan, former Member for Tabaquite—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—who is a walking encyclopaedia when it comes to local government; my colleague, the Member for Couva South, Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—and later on in the Twelfth Parliament, when the committee continued, I was joined by the Member for Chaguanas East, Ms. Vandana Mohit—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen:—as well as from the Senate, Sen. Anil Roberts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And I want to commend all the Members of the Opposition who participated—who were members of this committee and who participated in the JSC and the examination that we did, and that the Opposition choose to utilize a tool of this Parliament that allows the democracy of a minority voice to be heard. And I want to caution the Government on chastising any Opposition for utilizing the democratic structures provided for the hearing of minority voices.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, the Member for Arouca/Maloney indicated in her presentation, in moving, that the PNM has met its manifesto promises, and it is not the first time that the PNM has manifesto promises. Their general election manifesto in 2015, their local government manifesto for the 2016, and 2019 local government elections, also had a lot of promises that have not materialized. And

the Government spoke about completely restructuring and decentralizing the system for implementation of local infrastructure projects. They have failed in that. They said they will allow municipal corporations to engage directly, suitably qualified local contractors for drainage work to do infrastructure projects and to allow work on these projects to commence in a timely manner. They have failed to do that.

12.30 p.m.

They said as first responders, regional corporations in the event of a natural disaster will be allowed to have direct collaboration between local government bodies and central government bodies without the need for intervention by a Minister. They have failed to do that. Because the regional corporations, when flood up to their neck, they are begging for fuel for “dey” excavator to go and clear water courses. They are begging the Minister for intervention and the Minister has not heeded the call.

The Government claimed in their manifesto that they would foster and create a formal consultative process and forum where NGOs, CBOs and other civil society groups and interested parties can comment on and critic projects, plans and programmes for local government bodies before they are implemented and to make recommendations for improvement. They have failed to do that.

But I also want to tell you as a former UNC councillor and as a person who interacts with our UNC local government representatives regularly, the approach of our political party, as a people-centred party, it is based on political will and that is the difference between the UNC councillors and the PNM councillors because our councillors have an understood mandate to consult with communities and to involve NGOs whereas the PNM continues to remain disconnected.

The PNM promised to utilize the detailed regional development plans

prepared for the 14 municipal corporations under the previous PNM Government which also was adopted by the Partnership Government and for the basis of future development. They have failed to give the corporations the resources to do basic maintenance. Corporations could barely catch “dey” breath to do any sort of strategic planning and development. So you have failed to do that, but you are talking about it on a platform, you are talking about it in Parliament and presenting written document after written document; that is a far cry from reality. It is mamaguy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The Government in its manifesto said they will amend the relevant revenue and taxation laws to allow local government bodies to retain certain tax—

Madam Speaker: Okay, Member for St. Augustine, you know I have given you a lot of leeway. Remember what we are debating is the report.

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So if you could tie up what you are saying into the report because you are dealing with a manifesto and so on, tie that up into the report because this what we are debating. All right.

Ms. K. Ameen: Certainly. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. One of the manifesto recommendations had to do with property tax and that was dealt with by the Joint Select Committee and the proposal is that the dedicated source of funding, the proposal by the manifesto, that the dedicated source of funding from property tax will allow corporations to acquire the resources to empower their workforce to operate at a maximum capacity. That is outlined in the JSC Report, it is in the Bill, however, once again, the issue of property tax, the Opposition is very firm on our position that we will not accept the harsh measures therein.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The manifesto promised to amend the Municipal Corporations Act to give local government corporations a level of autonomy and executive authority similar to what is now enjoyed by the Tobago House of Assembly. The Joint Select Committee discussed that, the Member who moved the Motion mentioned that in her contribution, but we in the Opposition have a serious concern where you are creating an executive council that will centralize power in the regional corporations and exclude the minority. Both major political parties have members in minorities in the regional corporations. So it is not a concern to say that the UNC is afraid to say that our minority members will be left out, the concern is for democracy and the representation of all minority groups.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: So the manifesto promise here that came in the JSC Report again is a failure when it comes to opening up transparency and representation.

The manifesto says it will ensure that as a matter of policy, the first preference for the award of contracts for work done by local government is to be given to contractors and service providers within the geographic boundaries of the corporation, rather than from outside. I do not know if the PNM, how disconnected they are from reality but the truth is that there is already a court judgment that gives guidance to corporations in this regard.

Madam Speaker: You see, “yuh” going back to the manifesto.

Ms. K. Ameen: Or sorry.

Madam Speaker: And what we are debating here is a report.

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So as I said, you know I have given you a lot of leeway because in some of the things, I could draw a link but we are not talking about the PNM’s manifesto, you know, I do not know—so please get back to this.

Ms. K. Ameen: Sorry, Madam Speaker. Perhaps I was coming to the point in the JSC where this measure was dealt with but perhaps I will bring the measure first to clarify. But again, the issue of the corporations' procurement, their powers under the Act as discussed by the Joint Select Committee, again, it has an impact concerning the award of contracts in regional corporations. My colleagues will go further into it and explain how the Joint Select Committee has an impact on that.

Madam Speaker, the Joint Select Committee also discussed the role of the municipal police, the PNM's manifesto said it will give greater responsibilities and authority to the municipal police, the Government has failed to do that. They have promised the establishment of major administrative structure in municipal police that it has failed to deliver. My colleagues will later go into that. The Government—

Madam Speaker: I mean, I cannot tell you about how to do your presentation but tell us how the report impacts on what you are saying. Okay? We are not dealing here with the manifesto.

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, I want to—

Madam Speaker: One minute, please. Member for Princes Town, there is a Standing Order you wish to raise?

Mr. Padarath: Yes, Ma'am.

Madam Speaker: No, no, you do not sit and speak.

Mr. Padarath: Yes, Ma'am. I wanted to indicate to you it is in the report.

Madam Speaker: That is not a Standing Order.

Mr. Padarath: Just a point of clarification, Ma'am, it is in the report. Maybe she read it.

Madam Speaker: I said that is not a Standing Order. You have an opportunity to speak when you wish. Continue.

Ms. K. Ameen: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The measures with regard to municipal police in the Joint Select Committee is clearly on the record in the report that has been circulated to everyone and my colleagues will go further into it. I just wanted to indicate in my opening here that the Government has failed in their manifesto promise when it comes to municipal police.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: Madam Speaker, I want to say that in my closing that as a local government representative, I served from 2003 to 2010 as a local government councillor. In 2010 to 2013, I was a chairman of a regional corporation and I want to make some recommendations if I may. That the approach taken by the People's Partnership Government was not only about reform being legislative reform. The measures to empower local government cannot only be defined by legislation. You know, I sometimes hear the saying you cannot legislate good sense and the Government has failed to let good sense prevail when it comes to a number of issues. The fact that a lot of things have been falling apart, a lot of the measures that have been put in place. I mentioned before the fact that the State paid offices of local government councillors that were brought in as a policy, it did not take legislation, as a policy by the Partnership Government has been falling apart because the Government has not been paying and that has an impact. We talk about deepening democracy, Member for Arouca/Maloney moving the Motion, deepening democracy and empowering representation, that has an impact.

The Government has not dealt with the renewal of the provision brought by the People's Partnership for the exemption of VAT on vehicles for councillors and vehicles are a critical part of councillors' functions. The devolution of authority and resources that is mentioned in the Joint Select Committee that the Member for Arouca/Maloney spoke about, within national policy guidelines from central

government ministries such as for community development, for housing, social welfare, sports, planning and the environment and when it comes to equitable financial allocations to these regions. We are talking about asking corporations to adopt orphan spaces. Have we done an assessment of the work required? The needs assessments of these corporations or are we just going to just continue to give them money by “vaps”? Are we going to keep them as puppets on a string of the Government?

The approach of the People’s Partnership when it came to collaborative Government procedures has to be something that becomes a norm alongside the measures that the Government is putting forward in this Bill that were considered by the JSC. The regional co-ordination was dealt with in the JSC as well when it comes to delivery of water, electricity, telephones and other basic infrastructure by Ministries and the co-ordination or lack thereof in the regional corporations as given the power in the legislation. Community-based security and rehabilitation arrangements, expanded responsibility and increased compensation for local government representatives, these things were done under the People’s Partnership Government in terms of as a policy. So I am saying it takes more than just legislation to establish mechanisms to ensure high performance and accountability, something that the PNM has failed to do today.

In terms of money for development, in terms of money allocated for budget and through special purpose companies and a further \$520 million was actually allocated for the development of roads and bridges and so on through special purpose companies. Some of them do fall under the Ministry of Local Government, not all of it would be captured by this particular JSC but in the People’s Partnership term, through the use of all of these mechanisms, we were able to construct 1,150 local roads and this is just up to 2013. The data I have is

from the period in which I was a chairman from 2010 to 2013. So for the entire term of the Partnership, it would have been much more. You had 34.7 kilometres of box drains being completed to the extent that the PNM has been trying to demonize the UNC for performance by calling us the “box drain government”. Today, all the box drains are collapsing and you are doing nothing.

The Government at that time was—regional corporations at that time through the Ministry of Local Government was able to start and complete 31 pavilions. The construction of 60 bridges. Today, bridges are collapsing. I see my colleague for Tabaquite supporting residents who are protesting in Tabaquite for wooden bridges that are falling down. We had 969 projects completed by regional corporations including roads and drains under the Development Programme. We had 145 Litter Wardens who were recruited, trained and appointed under the People’s Partnership Government. This Government fired the Litter Wardens, left the corporations to fend for themselves and you have garbage piling up now and they are asking about why regional corporations are being called to deal with garbage. The local government is not just about roads and drains. The Partnership Government, the Ministry of Local Government, gave 50 scholarships for public health which was awarded to employees of local government to train as public health inspectors.

So, Madam Speaker, it is clear that this Government does not care about local government until it is a local government election. It is clear that their abuse is to mamaguy and we must reject that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: The Government has come here today and I feel as though they are continuing with a sort of manipulation of the people when they talk about promoting reform, they are talking about a lot of things that are not a reality and

they are, in the meanwhile, continuing in their abusive ways. That is some kinda—you know, “yuh seein’” elements of gaslighting and so on in there and I condemn that.

The Bill has to have more substantive changes in terms of being connected to the reality of what is going on on the ground in local Government. The Bill does not comprehensively address the promises by the Government and meaningful changes to deal with real issues. The Government, in my view, has also put forward proposals to remove and dismantle the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development so pretty soon, the regional corporations will fall under the Minister of Finance. Again, he has some far-reaching powers in this Bill that we have to examine and the Minister— Well, the newly appointed Minister of Local Government and Rural Development will no longer be the Minister of Local Government. That person will now be the Minister of Rural Development only and we have to consider that when we consider the measures put forward here.

Madam Speaker, I want to put on the record that the UNC recognizes the role of local government in contributing to the national economy. We recognize the role of local government in bringing governance closer to the people and we must not fall in the trap of taking the mamaguy and the political platform talk from the PNM because in the regional corporations and on the ground, what happens there is— I mean, that is the truth and the moment you step out of your door, you talk about local government. Fancy words and pocket squares do not fill potholes, you need real action.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. K. Ameen: And so while I really welcome this opportunity for our Parliament to debate local government, I caution the population not to fall for the gaslighting and the mamaguy and the continued neglect of local government by this

Government.

I want to thank my Opposition colleagues who have participated in the UNC's consultations with real local government practitioners in the preparation of this Bill and other stakeholders in labour, in business and so on because we believe in true consultation. With that, Madam Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Local Government and Rural Development (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am excited and privileged to be contributing to the debate on this particular reception of the report of the Joint Select Committee established to consider the reform of what is quite simply local government.

Madam Speaker, if you were to listen to the litany of woes, complaints and troubles that the Member for St. Augustine just put on the table, you might as well just pack up and go home. And when you consider that we stand here today as a country assessing the impact of law which is proposed by this report because there is a law proposed by this report, to change the lives of every single person in this country, I ask St. Augustine why would you stand in the way of delivering progress for people after 63 years of ole talk.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And, Madam Speaker, permit me to say this. This report has a Minority Report, we know that. It is at the back of the report, it is at the final page, page 332 and the views of the Opposition are set out. Executive Council that they have a problem, that it excludes the voice of the minority; that the Opposition disagrees with property tax; they say there is no provision for equity in population, the Bill reduces protection of workers and insufficient consultation.

So in the 30 minutes I have, as the proud representative for San Fernando

West, as the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, I say that I come here to deliver the operationalization of what has been spoken about, talked about, dreamed about and begged for by the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Tobago having its part in the THA structure, CEPEP located there via the Ministry which I conduct right now but Trinidad having been in analysis paralysis over and over for 63 years.

Now, on the issue of consultation, Madam Speaker, flagged in this report, permit me to put onto the record that in the period 2008 right up to 2016, we have had, Madam Speaker, 8,500 people in the consultations in the 14 regional corporations, 250 entities. We had another 8,000, nearly 9,000 in the 2015 consultations, again, countrywide. We had IT interactions: Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Twitter. We had 420,000 contributions from 300,000 Facebook users. We had 32,000 contributions on the Twitter platform. We had 11,000 visitors to the interactive site. We had 200,000 responses and interactions which were answered. Madam Speaker, 512,000 interactions in the period 2015 to date and the Opposition says in its one-page Minority Report: Not enough consultation.

Well, Madam Speaker, I stand here today to say that local government is with rural development the paramount, most important, singular enterprise that we are focused on as a Government because, Madam Speaker, this Bill really and truly, put into the context of the report, the report demonstrates there are 14 municipal corporations. The report demonstrates that those corporations are split between Opposition and Government. The report demonstrates that everybody wants better service and everybody in the 14 corporations has entered support for this and therefore, Madam Speaker, I say in a very bold way this Bill is not about politics today, this Bill is about service delivery. Attached to the report is a powerful series of amendments in a Bill.

The Bill proposes in 11 clauses, from clauses 3 to 11, it proposes significant amendments. Clause 3 treats with the Municipal Corporations Act. If you look to what the Municipal Corporations Act is, I am moving as local government because, Madam Speaker, the hashtag in the Ministry is #Iamlocalgovernment, #wearelocalgovernment. We are moving in local government because what this report asked to do is to fundamentally amend the Municipal Corporations Act. What could be wrong, Madam Speaker, in supporting the reform that we want? Because, Madam Speaker, if we give greater power which is what clause 3 does in the report of the legislation, if we give greater power to local government by creating a municipal council and an executive council, which I will explain in a moment, it means that we are giving the people greater power by greater service because they are giving their representatives greater power.

And the Government stands in the delivery of its enterprise to say that a municipal council where councillors elected, aldermen appointed, become full-time members of the municipal corporations, not part-time members as they are paid an honorarium or a pittance salary where they have to go and look for a job outside and part-time work to work on the inside. No, we say that the municipal councillors, elected and appointed as they are, will come into an executive council. What is the municipal council, Madam Speaker? “Leh we put it simple for people. Dais this like yuh Parliament.” The Parliament that is being created as the report recommends section 33B, the new 33B in the Municipal Corporations Act, the new clause 3 that we are looking, Madam Speaker, that is to create a Parliament, that is the equivalent. We create in a new 33C, we create a new Executive Council full-time paid people employed to work for the benefit of the people, operating just like a Cabinet.

Madam Speaker, why would the Opposition say that local government does

not deserve to have its own Parliament structure and its own Cabinet structure where the Executive Council gets to have the power to deliver relief? Is that not good enough for the Member for St Augustine? Well we say on behalf of the people of every Opposition municipal corporation and every Government municipal corporation, they deserve power and we will deliver it by the legislation that is recommended by this report.

Madam Speaker, we are talking about giving functions to local government. And what are the functions? We say that these functions will be carried out by Secretaries. So the THA is good enough, Tobago is good enough to have Secretaries: Secretary for Agriculture, Secretary for Planning, Secretary for Development but Trinidad and Tobago cannot have Trinidad having it in the Municipal Corporations Act?

Madam Speaker, permit me to look at that as it is recommended as it is attached to the report and we look, Madam Speaker, to the functions set out. We say that these functions are to solve a serious problem. Madam Speaker, chairman after chairman will tell you that one of the problems in local government is that the Mayor comes in, the Council comes in and the CEO stands apart and if the CEO and you “doh get along, yuh cannot function.” We now propose, just like the Constitution says in section 85, we now propose, Madam Speaker, inside of this legislation that the CEO has to take the directions of the Council. We now say that there is collective responsibility just like section 75 of the Constitution says. And what does that mean for the people of Trinidad and Tobago paying attention here? We say local government has to be elevated in terms of power and management similar to central government.

Madam Speaker, do you know that in Jamaica, a similar exercise such as this resulted in financial problems in the local government structure in Jamaica going

from the 70 per cent, 80 per cent subsidy in Jamaica down to 50 per cent? Because when they gave the power to local government to manage its taxes, to manage its revenue, to manage its expenditure, to manage its workforce, it resulted in a drop down to less than 40 per cent. Madam Speaker, you heard St. Augustine describe about money woes and about rats and about roads falling apart. Ask anybody in this country, local government has 80 per cent of the road network, local government has— Madam Speaker, I am moving from a Ministry that had 1,900 employees to 14 regional corporations, two statutory bodies, a Ministry and it equals to nearly 30,000 people. Madam Speaker, moving from a Ministry, taking away fees and allocations of roughly \$150 million to a Ministry of several billion dollars. But what does that matter to the people of Trinidad and Tobago if the money is leaking through the system, if contracts cannot be supervised, if employees cannot be put to work?

Madam Speaker, let us talk to the people of Trinidad, through you, in the context of this report, in the context of the legislation here. Ask the average citizen in Trinidad and Tobago if they think that the City Corporation or the Municipal Corporation workers are working in the best way possible, hard-working people, or if we all know CEPEP working where URP supposed to work, URP working where council supposed to work, CEPEP working where council supposed to work, so “who cutting yuh grass”?

1.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker, let me correct the record. The PNM in Opposition 2010 to 2015 never complained about the delivery of drainage through box drains or about recreational parks and development. We complained about the corruption in the delivery of that, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And it is by no mistake that I take the experience of my last portfolio, and having passed the laws that happened, to follow the money and deal with corruption in local government. Because, Madam Speaker, every dollar that we save, every bit of expenditure that we manage, we get to bring better services, Madam Speaker. So for the person who lived next door, at my constituency, as a Member of Parliament each of us here standing, in my constituency, Madam Speaker, I can tell you it is unacceptable to have grass 13 and 14feet high.

And, Madam Speaker, I say that in the context of this report. Because in allowing an executive council to go to work, in allowing a corporation to go to work and in giving it the power, Madam Speaker, to collect revenue, Madam Speaker, I have said this before, for people who are a little bit older and now for young people, there was a famous guy in Trinidad called Max Senhouse who used to say when he was selling things: “We need the money”. I can say that today to the Minister of Finance that local government will only prosper with the support of the Prime Minister and the Minister of Finance, but it will prosper as well on the benefit of what clauses in this Bill recommended proposed, which is that we use property tax. And, Madam Speaker, let me tell the good people of Trinidad that property tax, Madam Speaker, in local government, because that is the Trinidad issue, property tax is something that is critical to life, Madam Speaker.

Let us look at the financial provisions. This Bill proposes, as the report recommends, the inclusion of a new Part V, the old Part V. We are returning sections 77 to 81 of what was in the Municipal Corporations Act and we are saying that the money that comes from property tax is to go into a statutory fund. And, Madam Speaker, what are they to use that money for? Madam Speaker, it is set out in the final Schedule, Schedule No. 13 of the Municipal Corporations Act that the report proposes be amended, and it allows us to go right down the line:

construction and maintenance of local roads, 80 per cent of them. This country has 80 per cent of its roads in that category.

Madam Speaker, construction and maintenance of drains, local health, garbage collection, recreational grounds and parks, cemeteries. We get right down to promotion of local tourism, and as the Member for St. Augustine asked, the repair and maintenance of government schools and government-assisted schools. I would like to say in answer to the question on EFCL, the Government's issue with EFCL, I can certainly tell you what I have left behind, there are over \$100 million in matters involving corruption and fraud, that are in civil litigation recovery, but that money is what is poured into the 13th Schedule. Madam Speaker, would you let me know what time is full time?

Madam Speaker: Your full time is 1.17.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: 1.17. Thank you, Madam Speaker. So, Madam Speaker, we are seeing in the context of the new Part V, the introduction of sections 77 to 81 of the Bill, which the report proposes. We are saying, Madam Speaker, that the money for property tax is to go into serving people, Madam Speaker.

And, Madam Speaker, this Bill allows for the greatest form of equity. This Bill is not a UNC and a PNM division. Why, Madam Speaker? Why do I say that so confidently? Because the corporations will be what they are. A UNC corporation, a PNM corporation, another corporation controlled by a different political party have the same structure. They get to receive their money. They get to put that money to work. They get to organize employment. Madam Speaker, the Opposition says that there is no protection for rights of workers.

Madam Speaker, the report says otherwise. The report insists that the recognized majority unions are preserved. The corporations must speak to the recognized majority unions, Madam Speaker. Because when you look to the law,

we are not changing the provisions of the recognized unions. The Bill—the report says the corporation should have the power to employ its own employees. And it says if you are going to discipline employees you have to go to the Public Service Commission, you have to go to the SASC, the other commission.

But, Madam Speaker, it sets out in the new Schedule 12 an entire disciplinary process for workers, so that it is not arbitrary. And I wish to tell all hard-working people at the corporations that you need not listen to the fearmongering of St. Augustine and the Opposition. You need to look at what the law is proposing and you need to understand that you are protected by the Constitution and by the law. And if you are afraid, Madam Speaker, if you accept the UNC's argument at its highest, listen to what St. Augustine's logic applied, in the context of what she has said means. It means that a UNC corporation and its workers controlled by a UNC chairman or a UNC mayor with a UNC council has to be afraid of that council because they will go and fire workers. Is that what St. Augustine is proposing? Because this law is not designed for a government because this is not a PNM local government. This is split, Madam Speaker, equally between Opposition and Government and has been so for decades. So you take St. Augustine's fearmongering, she is warning the population, the hon. Member, be afraid of the UNC. How could that make sense, Madam Speaker?

Madam Speaker, let us look to the report further. In creating standing committees, what are the standing committees, Madam Speaker? We are talking about putting in standing committees. Spatial planning. We are talking about corporate services. Madam Speaker, in the corporate services, when we look to the section 35 onward, look at the division for finance and planning. Look for corporate services in the new 35B. Madam Speaker, St. Augustine and the UNC is saying stand in the way of digitization. Let me explain that for people. Everybody

that has a cell phone in their hand and could go online and open an app, go on Amazon, go to America Online, buy goods, ship it to Trinidad and Tobago, bring it in a barrel, “doh” listen to St. Augustine because St. Augustine is now saying do not digitize, do not bring services into the regional corporation.

Madam Speaker, this Government, certainly in the last Ministry I was in, a birth certificate is a click of a mouse or a tap on your phone. TTPost brings it to your door because you could pay for it online and you could pay for it with a debit card. Why should a vendor in the market have to have the indignity of going to the corporation to line up by a cashier who did not come out today, who have COVID, go down, they are writing it in a ledger book and you lost the ledger book, why? Why would St. Augustine stand in the way of delivering digital payment, digital services?

Madam Speaker, when will we look to the finance and planning and audit arrangements, Madam Speaker, unless we did not pay attention, we have a public procurement law. I drafted 12 of the regulations with the Minister of Finance to bring public procurement into life. Madam Speaker, how are we going to survive challenge proceedings if you do not have e-procurement, if people do not have transparency? Why should a contractor from Moruga/Tableland, why should a contractor from San Fernando West not be able to see what the corporation is doing online? Why would St. Augustine stand in the way of that? Why would they stand in the way of knowing where the corporation worker who is cutting grass, be it a daily-paid worker, a monthly-paid worker, a garbage truck, why would you not want to know where your assets are?

Madam Speaker, I work on data. My job is to operationalize. I believe in plant and machinery, people, processes and law. The law and the universe of law that I operate on now is the Municipal Corporations Act, Madam Speaker. And in

the Municipal Corporations Act there are 29 other laws that operate with this and electronic transaction is a feature.

Madam Speaker, my job, appointed as I am by the hon. Prime Minister to do this, is to transport what has been achieved in other areas successfully into this area. And, Madam Speaker, that requires an analytical approach, a dedicated implementation plan. And I wish to pause for a moment and say to Sen. Kazim Hosein, one of the hardest working human beings I have ever met, and to the late Franklin Khan, God rest his soul, Senator as he was, that they have performed phenomenally. And it is my privilege and pleasure to accept the baton and to get into what I consider I am good at.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And what is that? Operationalization, Madam Speaker, more jobs for people, more production, services reaching your door.

Madam Speaker, I will tell you, we have already designed the apps, the technology to achieve some of the things here. We have already designed the electronic systems. We have already designed an ability to move away from paper and keep records because, Madam Speaker, we have to deal with the issue of corruption. And, Madam Speaker, I hear my friend opposite me saying how you could do this in 48 hours?. Because we are not reinventing the wheel. We did it at the Attorney General's Office. And the Ministry of digitization, Madam Speaker, the Senator with responsibility for digitization is already plugged into this programme.

But, Madam Speaker, let us talk to the report in greater detail. Madam Speaker, this report brings to life a contract for the people of Trinidad and Tobago. The Leader of Government Business was right, that is never something that should stand still. We have stood still, the report has it, the history of consultations from

the Sinanan Committee come right through. Madam Speaker, why should the Government not deliver to the UNC, to the PNM, but more particularly to all the people of Trinidad and Tobago the relief that is required?

Imagine a better world, Madam Speaker, where services are at your doorstep. Have faith, Madam Speaker, that if you pay taxes, pay property tax or income tax, or any kind of tax, the question is not whether you are paying your tax, it is: What are you getting for it? And this report and this law proposes an audit committee, Madam Speaker, in answer to the minority report. The audit committee is not governed by the majority. It is like the Public Accounts Committee. It is governed, Madam Speaker, by a minority, by the Central Audit Committee of the Ministry of Finance, by the independent entities. It is not by the politicians.

Madam Speaker, this report makes section 93 of the Constitution relevant; that is the Ombudsman. This report makes the Auditor General, in section 116 of the Constitution relevant to be audited, Madam Speaker. Why would St. Augustine not want to have audits? Is it because of the experience in LifeSport? Is it because in the LifeSport scandal, corporations—

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, 48(1). My good friend was going good, 48(1). This has nothing to do with LifeSport.

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: So, Madam Speaker, in the accountability recommended by the report, in the section 69 proposed by the Bill attached to it, if Pointe-a-Pierre would only read “de people paper”, Madam Speaker, I will tell him the answer to St. Augustine is: Are you afraid of having LifeSport discovered?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Because I can tell you, Madam Speaker, some of my obligations in that not over yet, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: Far from finished?

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Far from finished, Madam Speaker. But I tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago today "watch dem coki-eye", Madam Speaker. And you have to do that, Madam Speaker, because this report recommends transparency, Auditor General, audit committee, digitization. You see, Madam Speaker, the average human being has to remember this. I have listened in the last couple of days to more scorn and more attention on a Minister of Local Government and Rural Development than I have ever heard in my life. All of a sudden the dignity of serving people where it matters, in their markets, in their homes, in collecting their garbage, in making sure the potholes in the road are—that has been reduced to rat and CEPEP. You heard St. Augustine a little while ago, fancy talk and pocket square? "Wha dat mean?" Madam Speaker, as a Member of Parliament coming from local government as I have, having served as an alderman, having worked at the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation, my grandfather, my grandmother, having served in the county councils, I come from generations of service, Madam Speaker. This is greatest pleasure. But I know what troubles them, Madam Speaker. What troubles them is the fear that the Government can get it done. What troubles them is the fear that a Prime Minister has laser-sharp focus on getting this done. What troubles them, Madam Speaker, is that the people of Trinidad and Tobago have this.

Madam Speaker, I will end quickly in my one or two seconds to say my instrument of appointment in my duties, the last duty is to wind up the operations of the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and manage transition. That role, my role, this Government's role, is to hand power to the people, all the people of Trinidad, Madam Speaker, whether they are UNC, whether they are PNM, and the only thing that stands in the way is the Opposition.

But not today, and not when this Bill goes to committee stage in either House, because it does not require their support. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*): Good afternoon, Madam Speaker, and thank you very much for recognizing me to join this debate that deals with local government reform. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am bewildered by the breakneck speed at which the former Attorney General, now new Minister of Local Government and Rural Development is working to deliver local government in under 48 hours. I hope that this Minister does not run the Ministry and introduce reform like the way he passed law as the Attorney General.

Now, the Minister indicated that this particular piece of law, when passed, will have far-reaching consequences and give power to the people and basically to the elected municipal corporations.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, during my contribution I will debunk that particular argument, where I will be able to examine various clauses of the Bill to show that this Bill does not achieve the process or the aim of decentralization, but rather centralization in the Minister of Finance. And the Minister indicated that, with the passage of this particular piece of law, a municipal corporation will now operate as though it is a Cabinet. Well, that is nothing further from the truth, because I will say that what the problem that local government currently face is that of financing and staff.

A Cabinet has all of the money of Trinidad and Tobago to operate with. The Cabinet can approve employment. The Cabinet can approve staffing. These municipal corporations are not going to get that particular power. So to come here

and mislead the Parliament in this manner, or misrepresent the particular Bill is quite unfortunate, because these municipal corporations are not going to operate as separate Cabinets throughout the 14 municipalities, but they are going to be operating as agents of the Minister of Finance. As I said, during my contribution I will outline exactly how that is going to be achieved by this particular Bill.

So as the Member for St. Augustine said, stop mamaguying the people. Let us be real with local government reform. You yourselves do not believe that this particular Bill will achieve local government reform. It is a good catch word. It is nice to say that the PNM has passed local government reform. I challenge this particular Government to ensure that this particular piece of Bill works.

Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have now been informed that there are Bills and laws that passed through this Parliament, even without Cabinet or even the Prime Minister's approval—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—and therefore I want to find out whether or not this has the appropriate approval. Because a Chief Parliamentary Counsel said that without the necessary approvals, Bills that are passed in this Parliament are very hard to implement, very hard to proclaim.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: 48(1) please.

Mr. Imbert: What is the relevance?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: What is the relevance of that?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, hon. Member, let us stick strictly with the Bill before us, so I suggest that you move on immediately.

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will address the report and the point I am making is that this Bill will never be able to be properly implemented in its current form. Because if you do not have the money you simply cannot implement local

government reform; you cannot do it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: You will have another piece of law on the law books that will be unproclaimed, not proclaimed.

Then I heard the Minister talk about—I mean, I was shocked that he had the gall to talk about a corruption in local government. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will take you back. I will take you back to an article that I myself was very shocked to read in this country, where—it is a *Guardian* article dated the 16th of July, 2019. And the article is entitled, this is what the article is entitled:

“Gangsters benefit from contracts through corporations”

The Diego Martin Regional Corporation and the Port of Spain City Corporation has been giving well-known gangsters, gangsters known to the police, multimillion dollars contracts. It was the former Commissioner of Police who came out into the public to inform Trinidad and Tobago of what was taking place in those corporations. So for the Minister to come and take about LifeSport, that Diego Martin Regional Corporation and that Port of Spain City Corporation has been controlled by the PNM. I am calling on this Minister to control his corporations, control them. And then has the gall again to speak about audits.

I know the Minister is fairly new to this Ministry, but time and time again we will hear, when we come to this Parliament on the Order Paper audited financial statements of various corporations are laid in the Parliament. So how can you stand in the Parliament and say that the UNC is blocking auditing of corporations? I mean, nothing further from the truth. Nothing further from the truth.

And another argument the Minister used was with respect to digitization, that we are standing in the way of digitizing local government. You do not need a

particular piece of law, or this piece of law to digitize. You can do that without the law. Give the corporations the technology. Buy the computers, buy the software, buy the hardware, put the people in the corporations and digitize if you are serious. You do not need law for that. You do not need law to buy a computer. So do not say that we are standing in the way of digitization. An entire Ministry of digitization has been created without a website. Imagine that. And then you come here to talk about we are standing in the way of digitization? The PNM is standing in the way of progressing Trinidad and Tobago, the PNM.

And when you look at the JSC Report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the members of that Joint Select Committee who would have submitted a Minority Report indicated that the policy of the United National Congress, and I will quote:

“That the Opposition disagrees with Property Tax being implemented at this time.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to just go through the clauses that deal with the property tax, and that is found at page 238 of the report, and I am quoting at clause 10(b). It says that:

“(2) Notwithstanding subsection (1) tax on residential land shall be paid to the Municipal Corporation in which the residential land is located.

(3) Notwithstanding subsection (1), the Minister may by Order declare which of the agricultural, industrial or commercial taxes may be collected by the Municipal Corporations and what percentage of those taxes collected may be retained by the Municipal Corporation.”

So the proposal that is outlined in the particular Bill is that the residential property taxes that would be collected will be retained by the particular regional corporation. Whereas the agricultural, industrial or commercial taxes will not be retained by the regional corporations subject to the Minister’s approval, the

Minister of Finance. So the Minister of Finance will tell them how much taxes they can keep in terms of agriculture, residential and industrial, and how much will be transferred to the Consolidated Fund.

So when you give the impression that all of the property tax is going into local government, that is simply not true, simply not true. So you cannot mislead the population by saying that all of the property tax will be given to the municipal corporations. That is not true. And we have raised time and time again that you cannot burden the population with taxes. There is the need for economic diversification. And the Member for Mayaro, time and time again, has indicated through budget speeches how we can diversify Trinidad and Tobago's economy.

And I will go through a few jurisdictions where there are constitutional duties given to local government to encourage diversification of the economy through local government. So if you really want local government to be reformed, give them the real power. Give them the real power.

So I understand that the Government is trying to supplement the finances of the corporations, but we are humbly suggesting on this side that property tax is not the way to do it. You have to do it through proper diversification. You have to do it through diversification.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are a few particular areas in the Bill that I would like to particularly deal with, and one of them will be the establishment and the reform, or the proposed reform of the municipal police that are found in the regional corporations.

So at section 48 of the current Municipal Corporations Act it says that for each municipality a municipal police service will be established and the amendment that is being created is that as the law currently is, it is the Statutory Authorities Service Commission that will consult with the Commissioner of Police

who will appoint a sufficient number of commissioned officers and subordinate police officers and constables.

Now, the amendment that we are seeing is that they are going to now add the words that:

“The Public Service Commission and the Statutory Authorities Services may, in consultation with the Commissioner, appoint the municipal police officers.”

Now, I am to understand that some of the corporations, I believe it is San Fernando, Port of Spain and I cannot remember the other one, which will fall under the ambit of the Public Service Commission, where there are other corporations that will fall under the Statutory Authorities Service Commission. So I do not understand why we are continuing with the disaggregation when all, if we are going to do local government reform for the benefit of removing the complexities when it comes to these matters of appointment, discipline, remuneration, liabilities, that you should have placed them under one umbrella.

1.30 p.m.

So that is one of the areas in which I would ask that why some more—why a closer look was not taken into the municipal police. And we have heard the complaints time and time again of the municipal police. There was one point in time that the matter eventually reached the Court of Appeal, and I believe the Privy Council. Whereby then regulations were then promulgated in terms of dealing with the discipline of those particular officers. And there are other jurisdictions where we could have learnt from such as United Kingdom, when it comes to how they deal with their, what we call the municipal police officers.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, earlier on, I said I would like to indicate when I used the argument or I made the submission that this particular Bill will centralize

power in the Minister of Finance, instead of decentralizing power to the regional corporations. And there was a *Newsday* article dated the 13th of December, 2018, and the article is entitled: “Imbert to control Local Govt.” That is the name of the article. And if you would permit me to quote, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was a quote from the former Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, and he said:

“The Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, managed by Minister Kazim Hosein is being downsized and come next year, there will no longer be a Local Government component to Hosein’s ministry.

This was revealed yesterday by Minister Hosein...”

And what Minister Hosein was saying—Minister Hosein, at that time was saying:

“There will be no Rural Development and Local Government Ministry again. There will only be a Ministry of Rural Development. Local Government Corporations will report directly to the Ministry of Finance.”

So these are not my words, these are the words of a Cabinet Minister who sat in the Cabinet, who I believe was a member of this particular Joint Select Committee.

And when we go through the particular report and we look at the draft Bill that is annexed to the end of the report, there are some very troubling amendments that we see in which the Minister can in fact have some control over local government. So the proposed section 17(1) reads:

“The Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors shall be eligible for such remuneration as may be determined by the Minister with responsibility for finance in consultation with the Chief Personnel Officer.”

Now, as I know it, currently the salaries, remunerations, benefits, honoraria I

believe it is now called, is set by—it is recommended or these offices fall under the Salaries Review Commission, a constitutional body. So why is it you are now removing those offices and their salaries from being recommended by the SRC, and now placing it in the hands of the Minister of Finance? Now, he is now going to control, whomever the Minister may be, will control the salaries and benefits that are going to be given to elected officials, elected officials. Because we have to remember that the aldermen and the councillors—sorry, the councillors are elected and the aldermen are elected through proportional representation. So their position within the corporations are also from the will and the voices of the people.

At section 33H(2), it says:

“A Corporation shall with the approval of the Minister with responsibility for finance in consultation with the Minister review its organizational structure.”

Again, an elected body is being asked to seek the approval from the Minister of Finance to determine what their organizational structure will be.

Section 37, they shall:

“obtain, subject to the approval of the Minister with responsibility for finance...”—get approval for—“...international donors any grant and of technical assistance.”

So again, if these corporations—and we normally see that there are engagements between the regional corporations and some of the diplomatic core right here, they lend assistance with respect to programmes and grants. That now has to be approved by the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I just ask what time do I end?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You complete at 1.48,1-4-8.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you. At section 108 he approves the—the Minister of

Finance again approves budget and supplemental budgets of the corporation. At section 112(1)(j) the Minister to approve sums not listed in the Act to be spent by the council. At section 112(2):

“Where the Corporation Fund is more than sufficient to meet the expenses specified in subsection (1), the surplus may, with the consent of the Minister,”—again—“be applied under the direction of the Council...”—inter alia—“...the erection of buildings or towards the acquisition of lands or buildings...”

Section 113, authorization of audits by the Minister of Finance. Section 116(1A):

“The officers authorized to sign cheques under subsection (1) shall be approved by the Minister with responsibility for finance.”

So we are seeing that basically, the Minister of Finance will be controlling one, the salary and benefits of the elected officials. And then two, their finances where we are seeing a change is going to be made to what takes place in Tobago because there is an argument that the PNM has used where when the consultations were being done, that there will be financial autonomy for Tobago. And that the local government bodies in Trinidad will model the Tobago system. But now we are seeing that it is now a system of financial dependency after this reform has been approved.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: So there is financial dependency. So those are the points I wish to raise with respect to the control by the Minister of Finance.

Now, there is another very important issue, Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, the argument that the Government used which formed part of the policy which then found its way itself into the JSC Report. Again, is that we are going to model local

government like the THA. But one of the most fundamental differences between the THA and local government is that the THA finds its establishment within the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago, and that is very important. Whereas, local government is established by a simple Act of Parliament.

So when we thought that local government reform was going to be proposed to this Parliament, I anticipated that it would have found itself in a constitutional amendment where local government would have been enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. That is what I thought. Because at the whim and fancy of the Government of the day, they can determine how long a corporation's life is by a simple Act of Parliament. We have seen that take place over the years under the guise of local government reform when the local government elections were postponed year, after year, after year. It took a Kamla Persad-Bissessar Government to call local government elections in the year 2010, after six years of—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—rejecting the voice of the people by the PNM. So we must ensure that there is some level of protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I know that you will agree with me that local government needs that level of protection.

Also, when you look at section 6 of the Municipal Corporations Act, again, by a simple Act of Parliament the Government of the day can determine how many municipal corporations that it can be. So, by the very next local government election we could hear that they increase the number of corporations from 14, to 16, to 20 and they can very well create those divisions within stronghold PNM corporations to have total control over the entire area. And we have seen that that has taken place with the Tobago House of Assembly elections where they increased the number of seats again by simple majority law.

And Mr. Deputy Speaker, I find my argument not—that my arguments are grounded by looking at other jurisdictions that have local government enshrined within its constitutions. And I would look at a few jurisdictions and I will take the Parliament through a few of those jurisdictions.

In the Maldives, their Constitution provides for something called decentralized administration and that is the same as local government in Trinidad and Tobago. And within that, there is the establishment of the local government bodies in their Constitution. It speaks about the elections of the local government councils within the Constitution.

In Trinidad and Tobago, those provisions are found, again, in simple majority laws within our law books. The responsibilities of local government are enshrined in their Constitution which says:

- “a. to provide democratic and accountable governance;
- b. to foster the social and economic well-being and development of the community;
- c. to establish a safe, healthy and ecologically diverse environment;
- d. to achieve such other objects as prescribed bylaw.”

And then what is very important is the finance aspect where it says that the:

“Local authorities shall be provided with an annual budget from the Treasury as provided in law, and shall also have authority, in accordance with statute, to raise funds.”

So that is Maldives.

Then I look at what—I came to the Caribbean and I looked at what Guyana did. And in Guyana at section 71 of their Constitution, and I was very impressed with the drafting of their particular provisions in the Guyanese Constitution where they outlined local government. And it spoke of the:

“Local government is a vital aspect of democracy and shall be organised so as to involve as many people as possible in the task of managing and developing the communities in which they live.”

And that is very important because throughout this entire particular JSC Report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we really did not see what are the achievements, what are the aims, what are the objectives of this particular Bill? Whereas we are seeing in other jurisdictions, they are actually saying that there is a constitutional responsibility being given to these bodies to foster a greater standard of living within the communities in which these municipalities govern.

It then outlines the local government areas, the election of the regional councils, the duties of the democratic—of the local government organs, and the power to take decisions. And it is very well spelt out in the Guyanese Constitution. And I know this joint select committee would have looked at those jurisdictions, and I was wondering, why recommendations were not made in order to make a constitutional amendment to that.

Then, when you look at Jamaica, which the Attorney General spoke of, in Jamaica, in their Constitution it says again:

“The purposes of local government shall be to-

- a. encourage and assist the effective participation of local communities in the affairs of local government;”

And what is very important is the protection that local government is being given in the Jamaican context. Unlike what we see in our context here that is being proposed, where the Minister has control over local government, the Minister of Finance, in the Jamaican constitution it reads that:

“Parliament”—not the Minister—“Parliament may make provision-

- a. for local authorities to generate and spend their own revenue;

- b. for assigning functions between the various tiers of government;
- c. relating to the manner in which local authorities are constituted and the nature and extent of their functions;
- d. for the holding of local government elections; and
- e. prescribing any other matter relating to the governance of local authorities.”

And those are the points I wish to make with respect to the constitutional protections and I believe that this a Bill does not give any constitutional protection to that of local government.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at the manner in which this particular Bill was drafted, it is very complex. It is a cumbersome piece of law. When you look at it. It is 11 clauses, but when you look at one particular clause alone, the alphabet ran out and they had to start over to aa. And why is it that you could not have looked at whether or not we could have repealed the entire Municipal Corporations Act if that is the policy of the Government and replace it with something else to make the drafting, to make the understanding easier. Because if persons who are not trained in law read this particular Bill they will be very confused by what the Bill contains in it. Whereas the Parliament should be the body where persons should understand the laws that we are passing in this place.

Then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is one other matter of courtesy and I would want to ask the Government why this was not done. When we were debating the THA internal self-governance Bill, I noticed that the Government did in fact invite the members of the THA to attend that debate. Today, when I look at the public gallery, not a single chairman or mayor from any of the local government bodies were invited to view these proceedings. And I find that very insulting to all 14 municipal corporations in Trinidad and Tobago who are elected officials where the

Government is seeking to now reform the manner in which they do their work. So I find it very insulting to those 14 municipal corporations.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with the few minutes I have left, I would just like to recap my points that not enough is being done in order to reform the municipal police service. Two, there is direct control over local government now, by the Minister of Finance. And third, that there are no constitutional protections for local government—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes, Member.

Mr. S. Hosein:—within the proposed reform. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know many persons may have boasted that they have served in local government before. What I can say is that I myself attempted to serve in local government. I was on the list of aldermen at the Chaguanas Borough Corporation in the elections in 2016 I believe, but I did not make the list. I did not make the cut. But here I am as the Member of Parliament for Barataria/San Juan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: So I thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And you have 30 minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thirty minutes you say?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thirty minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I listened to the contributions of the two Opposition speakers who have spoken so far, it just demonstrates to me how disconnected they are from reality. In particular, the last

speaker who alleged that he was on a list of potential aldermen for a corporation but never made the cut. I found a complete lack of understanding of many of the issues that made local government management, the management of local government, the functioning of local government and the work environment for local government practitioners, extremely difficult.

One of them I would pull out immediately. As a Member of Parliament in this House now for 30-plus years, having debated several reports from the Salaries Review Commission over the years, any serious Member of Parliament including the colleagues of the Member of Parliament for Barataria/San Juan who suffers from newness, will be aware that every time we have to debate an SRC report on the terms and conditions of remuneration for local government representatives, it is always a bacchanal. You always have a series of complaints coming from local government councillors, on both sides of the aisle that the work that they do is not sufficiently recognized by various salary review commissions over the years. I have seen that for 30 years, and it is a fact.

I myself have been a member of various committees, making representations to various Salaries Review Commissions over the years, both in government and in Opposition. I recall some many years ago, being part of a team, a joint government and Opposition team. I was in Opposition at the time, making representations to the Salaries Review Commission, and there was a complete lack of appreciation of the work of local government councillors. Which is what has resulted in the pittance that is currently paid to local government councillors. And no matter how, we, whether in government or in Opposition have made representations to the Salaries Review Commission, there is this consistent theme that they continue to recommend pittances for local government councillors.

So what is an effective solution? It is in the Bill. If for 30 years the SRC has

refused to appreciate the work of local government councillors, are we going to do that for another 30 years? Which is what the Member for Barataria/San Juan would want us to do. Leave it so. Leave it with the Salaries Review Commission. Let them continue to recommend a stipend of \$4,000 a month for local government councillors. Well, we are not leaving it so. And that is why in this legislation, the remuneration will be determined by the Cabinet.

Whenever you see reference to a Minister, Minister of Finance as the case may be, that is in effect a reference to the Cabinet. So that in the new local government system our councillors and aldermen, whether they come from the UNC, or whether they come from the PNM, or any other political party that manages to win a local government seat, or manages to qualify for an aldermen position, will now receive proper compensation determined by the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago. This is a fundamental improvement in the current system. And for the first time, local government councillors will receive what they deserve. Why would anybody want to argue against “dat?” And it goes back to the point I made, that the UNC is totally disconnected from reality. Why you quarreling about “dat?”

And in addition, I notice that both speakers who have spoken so far are complaining about what they see as a measure of control by the Minister of Finance over local government corporations. That too is absolute nonsense. At present, Mr. Deputy Speaker, every year at budget time the Parliament is called upon to approve the appropriations for various Ministries and Departments and agencies, one of which is the Tobago House of Assembly. And after having reviewed, examined, in Standing Finance Committee, debated appropriations to various Ministries and Departments and the THA, a block sum of money is then approved for the THA which is sent to the THA on a quarterly basis. And the

Minister of Finance does not get involved in how that money is disbursed by the Tobago House of Assembly. We agree on a figure, \$2 billion, or \$3 billion, whatever the number is and they get their quarterly amount. And then they decide their own priorities and they decide how to distribute the funds.

That is how the Minister of Finance relates to the Tobago House of Assembly. And that is the thought process that has led to the provisions in the Bill where the new local government corporations or the newly reformed local government corporations will now relate to the Minister of Finance in this way; apply for an allocation, and when you get the money, you will prioritize the work that you have to do, and you will use the money that is given to you.

It is a far better system than the current system where local government bodies have to go to the Minister of Local Government, have their projects and programmes reviewed, subjected to scrutiny, submit all sorts of paperwork, and wait until the current bureaucracy deals with their matter, and then eventually their projects are approved. That is the old system. We are moving to a new system where the relationship between local government bodies and the Minister of Finance would be one of providing the necessary funding.

But this current authoritative system where corporations, whether they are PNM corporations or UNC corporations, have to now subject themselves to a review of their projects and programmes by the Ministry of local government, justify them, satisfy the public servants in the Ministry of local government that these projects and programmes are worthy of funding, which in itself creates all sorts of inordinate delays and then eventually get the funding if the public servants deem that to be appropriate. We are doing away with all of that. We are introducing a system very similar to the THA model where funding will be provided to the corporations and they decide their priorities. What kind of person

would object to that?

If anybody on the other side did any critical thinking you would have recognized the revolutionary legislation that is being presented here today, revolutionary. Because one of the fundamental problems in local government, and I say this frequently, I will say it again, I am always so disappointed in the contributions from the Members opposite. They refuse to raise the intellectual content of their contributions. They are always down on some low level, I cannot understand it. Why do we not debate the issues? Because all of us who have been in Parliament, have suffered whether we are Members of Parliament directly, such as myself, came straight into the House of Representatives, or whether we have gone through the route of being a local government representative first and then becoming a Member of Parliament, does not matter.

All of us represent people and all of us are only too painfully aware of the bureaucratic strictures, inefficiencies that are inherent within the current local government system, where you have public servants who are not answerable to the elected officials. So you could have a council making resolution after resolution every month, making proposals for projects and programmes within their corporation, and the public servants just decide they are not implementing it because they are not accountable. There is no direct connection between the elected official who has gone out there, gone house to house and sought votes of their burgesses. There is no connection between that group of people who the people put their faith in and elect, and the people who have to actually execute the work. That is one of the fundamental weaknesses in the current system of local government.

So as I said, you could have a corporation month after month making resolutions and making all sorts of brilliant plans and programmes, but if the public

servants decide they are not going to implement it, “crapaud smoke yuh pipe”. And it does not matter whether it is a UNC or PNM corporation. I have seen for 30 years corporations have lost confidence in senior officials within their corporations. Whether it is the CEO, whether it is the engineer, or whether it is the public health—person in charge of public health. All the major important areas of local government, I have seen for 30 years.

Corporations have piloted and passed motions of no confidence in various officials of various types. And what happens? Nothing. Because of the current system. The politicians could pass any motion they want. What happens after that? The public servants are protected by whatever service commission that they report to and “dais de end ah dat”. Nothing happens.

And in fact they just—sometimes governments no matter which government it is just recycles these public servants, shifts them around in the corporations, does not solve the problem. But we are now putting in a system to provide the necessary authority, the necessary control, the necessary power, to the elected officials so that they will have a direct connection between the wishes of their burgesses and the actual execution of work plans and programmes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: That is the fundamental change here. Who could argue against that? Who could be vex for that? And that is the whole point of this local government reform, to upgrade the system of governance within the corporations. To create executive councils, to clothe these executive councils with authority.

With respect to property tax, I do not understand the argument at all. The Bill is clear, that residential taxes will be retained by the corporations for them to use. When we had the old land and building taxes system we collected maybe \$200 million a year. The reason why that figure was low was because of inefficiencies in

Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

the system, a whole bunch of households were not on the rolls. The annual ratable value probably going back to 1950, you know, you have houses with annual ratable value of \$100 and that sort of thing. But be that as it may, they still collected \$200 million. We expect with property tax, with the number of properties that have been constructed since the early days with the more efficient management of the information systems and so on, that we could collect may be 400/\$500 million dollars a year. All of that going to the corporations that they “doh” have right now!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.00 p.m.

Hon. C. Imbert: And if you average it—let us take an average, 14 corporations, each one will get maybe \$30 million a year from residential taxes to use to patch potholes, to clean drains, to fix recreation grounds. Who could argue against that? I do not understand the intellectual arguments on the other side. The corporations will have direct control over this. In fact, the system is going to be devolved so the corporations would be directly involved in the eventual evaluation of what property taxes should be which is what is done in other countries. So, you evaluate, collect and utilize the property tax for your Development Programme. “What you arguing against that for?” Where is the money supposed to come from? This is one of the things I do not understand, Members opposite quarreling and quarreling about local government bodies do not have the necessary funding that they need to do their work. You getting an average of \$30 million extra a year, but “yuh vex”. There is no intellectual capacity on that side, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: “What they quarreling so for?” And one of the things I am glad about is that this Bill requires a simple majority. It is going to pass whether you like it or not.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And I am certain that every single one of the 130-plus local government practitioners would breathe a sigh of relief and say hallelujah when this local government system is introduced; when they can be paid properly; when they could have effective control over the resources within their corporation; when they could have a revenue stream, a dedicated revenue stream coming to the corporation, they would say hallelujah. You all opposite could say what you want but the corporation members, the councillors and the aldermen are going to be very happy when this new system comes in.

And this thing has not drop from the sky. We have the same tired, old complaints coming from Members opposite: lack of consultation. Lack of consultation, my foot! I remember Mrs. Hazel Manning, when she was Minister of Local Government, working with all 14 corporations, creating strategic plans and development plans for each one of those 14 corporations, a body of work which will serve this country in great stead, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I recall, in 2013, when we were campaigning for the 2013 local government elections and deceased Martin Joseph, may God rest his soul, who was our campaign manager at the time, had asked me to prepare 14 separate manifestos for that local government elections. And I said to Martin, “ah say”, “What kinda ting is dat? How you go ask me to write 14 different manifestos?” He said, “You could do it, man.” I said, “All right.” So, I went by Mrs. Manning and I said, “Look, I know you have been working on strategic plans and development plans for the region, let me see them.” And I must say—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. C. Imbert:—I was impressed—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. C. Imbert:—at the quality—

Mr. Ratiram: Standing Order—

Hon. C. Imbert:—and the—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, one sec.

Mr. Ratiram: Standing Order 48(6) with respect to the relevance of the manifesto.
The Speaker has already—

Mr. Young: 48(6)? Boy, read your Standing Orders.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please, please.

Mr. Ratiram: 48(1), Mr. Speaker, 48 (1).

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please, thank you. Overruled. Proceed.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is a—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—classic example of what I am talking about. No critical thinking on the other side. None!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Intellectual bankruptcy.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Let me complete my point, maybe then the hon. Member would understand. Slow on the mark, obviously.

So, I went to Mrs. Manning, Minister of Local Government at the time, hon. Sen. Hazel Manning, and I got these plans and programmes for each one of the 14 corporations; strategic plan, business plan, development plan. And, as I said, I was really impressed at the work that had been done. There was a blueprint for development for each one of the corporations. So, what I did at the time, is for—I did the 14 manifestos, you had general core policies which is reflected in this Bill,

what you see in this Bill is the core policy that flowed from that era, and each corporation then had its manifesto which had its strategic plan and its development plan attached as the manifesto.

And I would urge all local government corporations, whether they are PNM or UNC, to revisit those strategic plans, business plans and development plans, physical development plans done by Mrs. Manning, update them. Because when this new system comes in, the sky would be the limit. Those are—that is your road map to progress within the local government system.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And that is the relevance that my honourable friend opposite could not see. Because those strategic plans, those physical development plans could not be implemented because of the archaic system and the lack of a dedicated revenue stream for local government. But they most certainly will be developed now.

And I want to pay tribute to all of the people have worked on this process over the years. We are talking—that situation with Mrs. Manning was 15 years ago or more. Then we came into Government in 2015, and Sen. Franklin Khan, again, God rest his soul, took that framework that had been developed through that 2013 series of manifestos and our 2015 central government manifesto—it had quite a component on local government arising from those 14 plans from 2013—and engaged in a series of consultations all over the country, fine-tuning the core policy and fine-tuning the policy that was contained within that model that had started in the 2006/2007 era, going into 2008/2009.

And then, we have had a change in portfolio, Minister Kazim Hosein has come in, again, refined the work that has been going on for the last 15 years, taking into account all the feedback and the consultations with the persons who are going

to benefit from this. So, we have had 15 years of consultation. “How much more yuh want?” I mean, I, as a Member Parliament, have had to grapple with this problem for 30 years.

When I go out and campaign, they are telling me about local government matters. I am not a local government official. But the people are complaining about the fact that the corporation is not attending to their needs, “de bush high, high; de drain eh clean; de pothole eh patch, dead dog on de road, de market is unsanitary, de recreation ground is unkempt”. This is what I, as a Member of Parliament in the central government, have to deal with. I have to deal with complaints from the local government system and I know every single one of them over there has the same problem. That is why I said they are living in cloud cuckoo land when they come in here and try to pretend that this is not a magnificent reform of the system—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—a magnificent reform of the system. Because when you have these executive councils, when you are able to pay local government councillors properly, so therefore, you can then attract better talent into the system—that is one of the problems as well. When you look at the typical person or—let me not—let me take that back. When you look at some of the people in the system, their only form of income is their stipend from local government. They do not have any other profession, they do not have any other career, they survive based on that \$4,000 a month, which cannot be right, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it cannot be right. We have to pay our councillors properly, commensurate with the value that is attached to them because they are very, very, very important.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: You know, there is a saying in other countries, I believe it came

from the United Kingdom, that “all politics is local”, and it is, it is local. And therefore, when you look at what we are trying to do here, we are trying to empower the councillors, we are trying to pay them what they deserve, we are trying to attract a higher quality of persons into the local government system, we are trying to make people committed because the whole concept of part-time and full-time is a big problem too. Because the SRC has operated on this concept that local government officials are part time but they are not.

When you look at the amount of work that is required to service a local government district, that is a full-time job, it is. And one of the things this new reform will do is ensure that this is now going to be a full-time career to become a local government official. That is a full-time job. You cannot have a second job. So, you will come now like as if you were a Minister of Government. Even MPs can have a second job but local government officials in the council will not be allowed to have a second job. It is a full-time arrangement. So, you have to devote all of your time, all of your energy, all of your resources to doing your work. And that is curing another huge problem within the local government system. And who could be against that, Mr. Deputy Speaker? By the way, how much more time do I have?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Seven more minutes.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. And I heard the Member for St. Augustine talk about how the original local government legislation so many years ago, the Municipal Corporations Act of 1990, had expressed a theme that local government bodies would be responsible for the maintenance of public buildings. Yes. Okay. But what happened since then? Since then, we have had UNC governments between 1995 and 2001, and between 2010 and 2015, that is 11 years of UNC governments. What did they do about giving the authority and the resources to local government

bodies to take care of public buildings? And that is a rhetorical question. They did nothing, absolutely nothing except talk. That is all they did.

I would venture to say that this is the most fundamental piece of legislation that I have seen in this Parliament for many, many years. “The other side just talking”; talk, talk, talk. But they had 11 years in Government, they did absolutely nothing about advancing the efficiency and the relevance and the delivery and the output from local government corporations. They did absolutely nothing; nothing. We are doing something. And this is why I said I am so happy that this legislation requires a simple majority because we are going ahead. They could make how much noise they want, they could make as much irrelevant comments as they want, they could go off on tangents, they could talk all kind of foolishness, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but we are going ahead with this local government reform because this is what the people want.

People want service. They do not want when they go to the local government councillor, all they could hear is, “We have no funds. I cannot do anything about it. I talked to the CEO and the CEO ain’t taking me on. Yes, I would ask the building inspector to come and look at that illegal structure, but he eh want to come.” That has to stop, that system of excuses where everybody is passing the buck to explain why they cannot keep communities clean, why they cannot cut bush, why they cannot deal with public health issues, why they cannot deal with illegal construction, a series, a litany of excuses, “I did not get funding from the Minister, public servants not taking me on”. That has to come to an end. We are in this thing too long; too long.

And when one looks at what we are trying to do here, this is going to give local government officials the tools that they need—finally, finally give them the tools that they need, give them the authority that they do not have right now, give

them the ability to execute their own plans and programmes without interference from central government. Quite the opposite of the points that are being made opposite; quite the opposite of that. Local government bodies can now do their projects and programmes without interference from central government. And they would have a dedicated revenue stream which they could only increase. The reason why we are starting with residential as being the property tax element that corporations would be allowed to keep is that that is the one that is most far advanced with.

You would have heard commentary to the fact that we have crossed the threshold, the 50 per cent threshold required for data collection to enable us to populate the roles—the valuation roles to allow for the collection of property tax. Yes, that is so with residential properties. But we are somewhere off in terms of commercial properties, industrial properties, agricultural properties. So, as the system evolves, as we start to see how the collection of property tax—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes, Member.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. I am almost finished. As we start to see how the collection of property tax will work, as we start to see how local government bodies are going to utilize this tax for the benefit of the people, then we can look at other forms of tax as we develop that aspect of the property tax collection system and see what else in terms of property taxes can be devolved to local government bodies. But we are starting with the most obvious one first, the one where we are most far advanced and the one that is easiest as well.

Because if you look at the 14 corporations, some corporations have no industry at all. So, is it fair that a corporation that is heavily industrialized could keep all the revenue from industrial taxes, whereas another corporation that has no industry at all, they would get nothing? But in every corporation you have

residential properties, in every single corporation across the country, so there is logic in it as well. You would have some entities that will have a lot of agricultural properties, some will have none, but all have residential. So, we are starting with residential for two reasons: firstly, it is the most advanced, and secondly, it is uniform throughout the entire country.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am very proud as a former Minister of Local Government—I was Minister of Local Government from 1993 to 1995. I am very proud as a former Minister of Local Government to see, after 20 years, the problems that I experienced as Minister of Local Government 20 years ago finally being addressed by the most progressive government Trinidad and Tobago has ever had. I support this Bill wholeheartedly. I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Couva South—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—and you have 30 minutes, Member.

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I join this debate here this evening. And in his last salvo, the Minister of Finance and Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East, attempted to remind us that he was a former Minister of Local Government and my colleagues on our side could not remember anything about that tenure of his political career—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—because he made no impact upon local government and improving the quality of life and standard of living of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And when I listened to the Minister of Finance, who also holds the responsibility of being the Chairman of the People's National Movement, indeed, he seems to be disconnected from the reality and the truth, in terms of when the People's Partnership Government was in political power under Kamla Persad-Bissessar and the dignity that her government and her leadership was able to provide to the local government fraternity in Trinidad and Tobago. And although my colleague did point in that direction during her contribution, that is the Member for St. Augustine, sometimes it is important to reiterate and reinforce because the public might fall victim to the propaganda of those on the opposite side. Because when they have nothing credible to argue, they go off on a tangent of attempting to mislead the population of this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And that is why a PP Government, led by Kamla Persad-Bissessar, as Prime Minister, empowered councillors through training, through the provision of state-paid offices, where all local government practitioners have the opportunity to be able to engage; engage members of the public and their respective burgesses, something that they did not have before; the provision of secretarial staff for every councillor; increase travelling allowances, and exemption of vehicle tax and so on, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And we were able to empower corporations through the devolution of authority and resources with national policy guidelines from central government Ministries and so on, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So, I want to tell the Minister of Finance, the reason that pavilions are in a state of disrepair, grass is high on recreation grounds, there is a state of decadence as it relates to the state of affairs in local government delivery is because he, as the Minister of Finance, has deliberately squeezed corporation in terms of their funding, and so on—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—and that is why you have people dissatisfied today. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation—the budget was read in when?—October of 2021. We are in March of 2022, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and up till today, the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation has not gotten its releases. It has not received its releases for the maintenance of roads and traces, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: So that is why when I am driving throughout the constituency of Couva South and in the respective electoral districts and the 14 electoral districts within the geography of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, I am driving like if I am in obstacle course because that is the legacy of the Minister of Finance. That is the legacy of their entire Government. But I want to take the opportunity, Mr. Deputy Speaker—Madam Speaker, sorry, to focus on some points that were raised during the course of this particular debate here this morning.

The Leader of Government Business, in piloting the report on behalf of the Government, indicated that she was a bit unclear about the points of departure and the Minority Report of the Opposition, and there was absolutely no justification for a Minority Report to be put on the record by Members of the Opposition, and Members of the Opposition do not appreciate the role and function of local government. And she went on, that is the Leader of Government Business—attempted to attack the Leader of the Opposition and a senior Member of the Opposition as it relates to their comments about local government and so on. And I want to place on the record again here this afternoon, Madam Speaker, what was

said had nothing to do about attacking local government, or the workers, or the concept of local government and so on.

The Leader of the Opposition was simply placing on the record and making her comments relevant to the reshuffle as it relates to what was done by the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, and the fact that San Fernando West is now the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development. It will bring about no transformation and service delivery to local government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: That is all. And if they cannot understand that, and they cannot take the heat and jamming, well, find another profession.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, and the Member for Arouca/Maloney quoted and indicated that the CEO of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation signed off on the report. and, in fact, words to the effect that we, that is the—we are in support of the report and we are in support of the Bill and it was one, Satraji Maharaj, the CEO and the fact that because the CEO signed off or gave her support that the Member for Arouca/Maloney, in a very disingenuous manner, attempted to create a narrative and paint a picture that the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation was in support of this report. Madam Speaker, the CEO of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation has absolutely no authority and legitimacy to speak on behalf of the political arm of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: So, it is disingenuous on the part of the Member for Arouca/Maloney and the Leader of Government Business to try to hoodwink the population of Trinidad and Tobago into believing that the

Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation is indeed in support of this Joint Select Committee Report, Madam Speaker.

And, Madam Speaker, the newly minted Minister of local government, the Member for San Fernando West, if you listened to him during his contribution, you would think that he is the saviour for local government and saviour for the Government of Trinidad and Tobago. If you listened to him and his contribution, Madam Speaker. And you feel I would conclude after having listened to him—

Madam Speaker: Do not forget, hon. Member.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Yes.

Madam Speaker: Okay.

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—after having listening to the hon. Minister, Madam Speaker, that every aspect of local government will be delivered to the people of Trinidad and Tobago since he has now—since the hon. Minister has assumed the responsibility of that portfolio.

He has arrived on the compound, I think, for what, 48 or 72 hours? And apparently every citizen of this country now will experience what is called—what was the term they used?—I think it was transformation and service delivery, Madam Speaker. And he went on to—the Minister attempted to create, again, a good feel, a win, that, indeed, what he did—what the Minister did, as Attorney General in terms of the digitalization of records and so on—and I am sure that my colleagues can call him out on that too, in relation to what level of success, in terms of digitization of records and so on, occurred at the office of the Ministry of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs. And the Minister attempted to berate my colleague, the Member for St. Augustine, to say why would St. Augustine stand in the way of online payments and digitalization of records and so on? This is a Government that always likes to applaud itself, in terms of public relations and the

statements that they make.

2.30 p.m.

You know, the Member for St. Joseph, the Minister of Health promised Trinidad and Tobago digitized vaccination cards. How long now? Since the pandemic—we are what? Three years. We are into the third year since Trinidad and Tobago went in the direction of declaring that we were, indeed, feeling the effects of the pandemic. And, Madam Speaker, at the end of the day, we are still, as a country, to see the light in relation to the digitized vaccination cards that were promised. So, again, I do not believe what has been stated by the hon. Minister here this afternoon in terms of the transformation of records will be realized with the wave of a magic wand or his presence in that said Ministry.

And, Madam Speaker, why are we here today? We are here today because the House has been convened to debate and consider this report. As my previous colleagues have stated in relation to Joint Select Committee on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020. And, Madam Speaker, we have handed in—and when I say “we”, we have handed in a minority report, and my colleagues, the Member for St. Augustine, the Member for Chaguanas East and Sen. Anil Roberts, put pen to paper, as we would say, in compilation of this Minority Report.

And, Madam Speaker, again, the Minister of Finance attempted to create a narrative during his contribution, as if to say or if to conclude that the Opposition did not have the depth to speak on local government, and I want to remind the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Finance, that the Member for St. Augustine was a councillor and former Chairman of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*] **Mr. R. Indarsingh:** The Member for

Chaguanas East, was a former councillor and Mayor of the Chaguanas Borough Corporation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, our Bench today, in terms of its composition, we have eminently qualified persons led by—and sometimes it is important to remind the country that our Leader of the Opposition, former Prime Minister, started off her career in local government as an alderwoman at the St. Patrick County Council. And, in fact, I stand to be corrected, but I think—I am of the opinion that she did a thesis on local government. So it is depth in terms of her leadership and advice on this particular issue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Madam Speaker, when she was—that is the Leader of the Opposition—at the St. Patrick County Council, in tandem with a former Member of this House, in the person of Dr. Surujrattan Rambachan, they were able to have a vision to deliver the Shanti Tiram or the Shore of Peace, at Mosquito Creek, Madam Speaker. And even my colleague, the Member for Moruga/Tableland, is a former councillor at the Princes Town Regional Corporation and my colleague, the MP for Couva North, he too, served as an alderman at the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. So there is depth, there is capacity and there is expertise—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—in terms of when we present our arguments from the angle of a joint select Minority Report, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, the Government want the Opposition to have confidence in what is before this House today. Madam Speaker, the Chairman of this Committee is somewhere now—or the former Chairman of this Committee now is somewhere in Trinidad, and we

think he is on the way to Canada, and he has abandoned the People's National Movement and the Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Madam Speaker, they want us to have confidence. But, Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister and the Cabinet did not have the confidence to allow the then line Minister with responsibility for local government to chair this Joint Select Committee, Minister Kazim Hosein, the former Minister of Local Government and Rural Development. The Prime Minister did not have confidence in him to chair this Committee, you want me to have confidence in what they put forward here, Madam Speaker?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, time longer than twine, at the end of the day. And, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance attempted to create a glorified position as it relates to the benefits that will accrue as it relates to local government councillors when this particular report is adopted by the House. And he signalled very clear that whatever the Opposition will say here this afternoon, they will not take on. It will be irrelevant, because the Government will use its majority in the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago.

And he focused on—and I am looking at page 264 of the report, Madam Speaker, when he indicated and he pointed in the direction that:

“The Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors shall be eligible for such remuneration as may be determined by the Minister with responsibility for finance in consultation with the Chief Personnel Officer.”

That is at section 17(1) and 17(2):

“The Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors of a Corporation shall be paid out of the fund of a Corporation...”

And section 17(3) states:

“A Member of Council shall not receive any remuneration...”

And so on.

And he indicated too that as it relates to what is being proposed, Madam Speaker, he indicated that the remuneration will move from somewhere from approximately \$4,000 to \$10,000, Madam Speaker. And, Madam Speaker, all that is good, but what the Minister did not tell this House this afternoon is how this figure of \$10,000 was arrived at. What was the benchmark? Did they do a comparative analysis and so on? Was a job evaluation exercise utilized? What comparators were used by the Committee to arrive at this figure?

And, Madam Speaker, he also focused on the fact that councillors will be transitioned into full-time councillors. It will no longer be part-time. And he is the chairman of the People's National Movement, and I am sure that in general council meetings or outside of the fold of general council meetings, councillors, who are within the fold of the People's National Movement, because there are councillors within the fold of the political party of the United National Congress, and they have asked us, Madam Deputy Speaker—Madam Speaker, sorry, that they want clarification on this issue, because there are persons who are Councillors now who hold jobs, and whether they will be forced to resign or they will have to resign their respective jobs. And who will compensate them for their years of service in whatever job that they may hold? Madam Speaker, and what will happen to their pension contributions? What will happen to their group health plans and so on? And, Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance failed to address this particular issue.

I am hoping, during the course of this debate, that someone on the Government side will address this issue of part-time to full-time transition and the

implications. Because if you make someone full-time, you do not only address the issue of salary. You have to address it from the point of view of compensation and compensation entails a pension plan, a group health plan, and I could go on and on in terms of its implications for relatives and dependents from the point of view of spouses and dependents, Madam Speaker. And remuneration now no longer means that it is moving from—it is no longer a stipend, so it is a salary. What category, in terms of classification, in terms of national insurance contributions and so on, Madam Speaker? And councillors are asking these questions, and the Minister of Finance and the Leader of Government Business, they have failed to address this particular issue, Madam Speaker.

And, Madam Speaker, very quickly, I want to go on to a couple issues which are found in different areas of this particular report, because at pages 271, 272, 273 and 274, it focuses on the very important issue where the corporation will have the responsibility to establish its organizational structure. And also, at page 274, it focuses on the issue of:

“A Corporation shall provide for the establishment and maintenance of a pension scheme or arrange for membership in a scheme for its contracted, permanent and daily rated employees.”

Madam Speaker, I am forced to ask the Government, have they now gone against their policy pronouncement or announcement that was made in their Budget Statement of 2020, when the Minister of Finance indicated that daily-paid workers in the public service, when they retire, a lump sum of money is received, but no pension and there will be a contributory pension plan similar to the contributory pension plan in force for public sector workers, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, this was made in December of 2019. We are in 2022. The horizon for the daily-paid contributory pension plan cannot be seen from the point

of view of the Minister of Finance, because the Minister of Finance will not allocate money for this particular initiative, he announced, to become a reality. And I have to ask the question: Will it now be 14 pension plans? Will each corporation, will they be called upon to have a pension plan of its own? What will be the composition of the pension plan? Will there be a management committee? Madam Speaker, will the unions—because they boasted, the Minister with responsibility for local government boasted that we are not interfering with the role of recognized majority unions.

But, at the end of the day, in local government, there is a workforce of approximately 27,000 monthly paid represented by the Public Services Association. The San Fernando City Corporation is represented by the Contractors and General Workers Trade Union. The Port of Spain City Corporation by Amalgamated Workers Union and the rest, the 12 other corporations, represented by the National Union of Government and Federated Workers, and there is a blanket recognition certificate. Will the recognition certificate have to be amended to facilitate the recognized majority union in each of these corporations? And that is the fundamental question which has not been answered by any Member on the Government side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: So, we will reject this report. This is cat in bag.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Madam Speaker, they want local government workers to believe that everything will be hunky-dory after this report is adopted by a simple majority. When workers do not know about the daily-paid contributory plan that was announced by the Minister, they do not know how much contributions, in terms of what percentage on their salaries, they will have to contribute to these

pension plans in the respective corporations. And, at the end of the day, not one of them will stand up and tell you how much capital injection will be needed in every corporation to get a pension plan going.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And if they cannot get one in three years going, Madam Speaker, I am putting it to you here this afternoon that the Government is about deception and public relations here this afternoon. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: I would ask you to withdraw that word. I would ask you to withdraw that word.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, because I used a couple of words towards the end, which one?

Madam Speaker: I am not going to repeat the word. I am going to ask you to withdraw a particular word you used about the Government being involved.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Well, Madam Speaker, I withdraw, and the Government, again, is failing to tell the population the truth as it relates to what is their real intention.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, I also want to ask the very important question, because they have said that this is about where the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development will probably or the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development will no longer exist. So, there seems to be an orchestrated plan to get the Member for San Fernando West out of the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago. And, in addition to that, where the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development will not exist—

Mr. Deyalsingh: Standing Order 48(6), imputing improper motives against the Prime Minister, getting somebody out of the Cabinet.

Madam Speaker: Continue.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I come to the end of my contribution, I am forced to ask, if local government employees are to be redeployed into the Ministry of Finance, how many of them will have the skill sets to go into the Ministry of Finance? And, at the end of day, I want to warn local government employees, retrenchment is on the horizon in the thousands, because this Government continues to gripe, they continue to moan about the size of the public service wage bill. And that is why I challenge them even to tell the country, while they propagate that everything is okay as it relates to local government reform, why they have failed to improve the terms and conditions and salaries of workers over the last seven years in local government? And I am putting it to you, they have something planned in the pipeline where this Government—when they say that you cannot trust, that they have nothing to fear and we must not go in the direction of advising, I want to tell the workers, from a local government point of view, their jobs are under threat. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara.

The Minister in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Lisa Morris-Julian): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I consider it an honour to be before this august Chamber to speak on a topic that is near and dear to my heart. My family's history is firmly entrenched in local government. My grandfather, Leroy Morris, was a Mayor; my great uncle, Jimmy Morris, was the councillor for Arima Central for over 11 years. My deceased grandmother, may she rest in in peace, was the first women to contest and win the electoral district of Valencia. So, Madam Speaker, what I know about local government, they would never know.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, I heard the Member for Couva South speak about the calibre of local government representatives that are currently in the House, and if it were a competition, Madam Speaker, we would win. San Fernando West was an alderman; Diego Martin Central, a councillor who became Chairman; the Deputy Speaker of the House, councillor who was Vice-Chairman and won Tunapuna back to back, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Toco/Sangre Grande. The Member for Toco/Sangre Grande, an alderman. The Member for Point Fortin, councillor, Deputy Mayor, Mayor. The Member for Arima was once a councillor in the Arima Borough Council and, Madam Speaker, of course I, councillor, Deputy Mayor, Mayor of Arima for two terms.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian:—and now, Member for D’Abadie/O’Meara. Madam Speaker, all born and bred “Arimians” can attest to the godfather of Arima politics, Ashton Ford, who served as the youngest Mayor for Arima in the history of Arima and quickly became Member of Parliament for Arima in these very Chambers, many years ago. You see, Madam Speaker, we all served under the PNM flag, because we care about local government.

The purpose of the local government reform is to provide an organized system where councils exercise their power and responsibilities to work for peace, order, good governance of all districts. And I stress, again, Madam Speaker, peace. As a councillor, I dreamt of this day happening, and thanks to the Prime Minister, I am now afforded the opportunity to be part of this manifestation.

In August 2019, I appeared in front of the Joint Select Committee. In September 2020, I was appointed to the very same committee. So, I am very much

part of this process and of that I am very proud. It is the concrete realization of a dream that began within the People's National Movement. Madam Speaker, I do not speak because I have a mouth. I speak because I know the system. I am a proud product of this system. I belong to local government and local government is me.

You see, Madam Speaker, if you can raise worthy representatives through the local government system, then you are doing a good job. I prayed, Madam Speaker, and I ask for good reasoning. I hope that my colleagues on the other side would care about their councillors, their councillors who are forced to beat their bodies left and right for protest. I was hoping that they would care enough for these councillors and these aldermen and these Chairmen to care to implement this to work together for us to do it for all local government representatives.

You see, Madam Speaker, please bear in mind, local government reform is not just for the councillors, the aldermen and the mayors, but it is for the benefit of Trinidad. Tobago, Madam Speaker, has long reached where we are supposed to be. And as the Member for Diego Martin North/East said, all politics is local politics, and if you do not care about local politicians and local government, then you have no right to be in central government, which is why we are in central government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, I have heard it referred that some people would describe local government as drains and garbage, not knowing that these are not slight inconveniences. In fact, it is very important for the life of a burgess, and if you do not care about the quality of life for your burgess then you should represent the said burgess. You see, Madam Speaker, I was there when Franklin Khan, may he rest in peace, went to every single municipality attending public consultations, fielding questions from the public and assisted everyone greatly, and also noticed, Madam Speaker, it was the UNC councillors who participated in what

the Member for St. Augustine called a PNM meeting.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: They were there and they participated actively. Madam Speaker, this report is about empowering local government. This reform has been long and coming, and it would revitalize local government through the devolution of authority. It will improve efficiency, responsiveness and the efficacy in the delivery, accessibility and sustainability of public services and goods.

Madam Speaker, I was lucky to serve under Sen. Hosein, and I am very positive that the impact he had on us as councillors would reap benefits to the People's National Movement far into the future, Madam Speaker. Having served as a mayor and a council member, I understand the importance of having a continuous connection and relationship to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I understand that it is more than policy perspectives and guidelines. It is about supervising the execution of projects and programmes that directly impact the man on the street.

Madam Speaker, when I was a mayor, I had to resign and go into a system where there was no NIS, where I was paid a stipend, where there was no maternity leave. And, today, I am happy to know that would change. Under this proposal, Madam Speaker, future mayors and councillors will be on the job full-time. We have been hearing talk, Madam Speaker, from our colleagues on the other side about how much they care about the country. But, you see, Madam Speaker, we will know, because once this is passed, we will get to see exactly the calibre of candidates who would be prepared to give up their jobs. If they win their seats, since the proposed local government reform legislation demands a full-time mayor and full-time councillors, and I think, Madam Speaker, that councillors deserve more pay. And we listen today, as the Minister of Finance told us, they will get

what they deserve.

Madam Speaker, it is with interest I noticed they spoke about the gentleman, the Chairman for Couva/Tabaquite coming to protest, and I have listened to them speak about other UNC-run corporations. Madam Speaker, I can tell you, I have sat on TTALGA with those gentlemen for many years, and they want this even more than we do. They want the reform. Please give them what they want, from personnel, public health, sanitation to markets, dog control, it seems unimportant to the other side, but it is important to the people of Trinidad.

Madam Speaker, this progressive reform is brought to you courtesy the People's National Movement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, I listened to the Member for St. Augustine speaker about political victimization. But if you examine the reports by the deceased Franklin Khan, you would read about Tyrone Clark, who claimed because he was in a UNC stronghold, Latchoos Road, and they voted PNM, they were suffered by the councillor for the area. You see, Madam Speaker, we wrote everything down. And as the Opposition Leader once said, in a press release on June 26, 2019 and I quote:

“The Opposition declares its support for Progressive Reforms in any regard and especially that which can improve the functioning of Local Government. We believe that local government corporations must be empowered, and we agree with moving forward with reform of local government.”

So, Madam Speaker, why waste our time? This report is testament of what the Member for Siparia speaks of, progressive reform. I remember when proportional representation came in, Madam Speaker. I remember it well, because

they knew that they were going to lose, and they wanted to ensure that they would have a position in every single council, but it worked for us, because now we also have minorities on their councils.

Madam Speaker, this Government held many consultations. We have listened to councillors, mayors, aldermen, community stakeholders; both from the PNM, UNC and many other parties. We listened, we took note and we incorporated suggestions. You see, Madam Speaker, we believe in accountability. The Opposition has an issue with that word “accountability”. It is their kryptonite. They seem more comfortable with the word “peculate”. They will get up and start arguing for the most frivolous of reasons not to support this report and you should ask yourself: Why?

You see, Madam Speaker, because I am from the system, we know about reports of persons getting paid, but not working within these corporations. Going to work for 7.00 a.m. and leaving at 8.30 a.m. We have had reports of criminal elements, those facing jail time and those under investigation receiving contracts from several corporations, not in the PNM strongholds.

3.00 p.m.

And we have had UNC councillors themselves facing charges of misbehaviour in public office and bribery. Just in July 2021, the TTPS issued a release informing us about the councillor in Sangre Grande charged with misbehaviour in public office, the princely sum of \$15,000. A good friend of mine was arrested for the not so princely sum of \$1,500 and to this day, Madam Speaker, I still think he was set up from within his own circle. Madam Speaker, what I know from personal experiences, when the UNC sent a gentleman to be the alderman whose name was heavily involved in LifeSport I expressed my displeasure. I expressed my fear. But as Mayor it really was not as much as I

thought it would be because he is hardly ever there. And if his companion who started the whole LifeSport fiasco could sit in the other place, I guess that is why he is sitting in the Arima Borough Council.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, there is even a fishy tale of a gentleman who kidnapped a Nigerian diplomat some years ago and is bosom bodies with a high-ranking member of the UNC. You see, Madam Speaker, I hope and I pray—

Mr. Lee: 48(1), Madam Speaker—48(1), please. This is not about the report what the Member is talking about.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, it is about the quality—

Madam Speaker: Continue.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Thank you, Madam Speaker—the quality of candidates and my sincere hope that we do not have to screen from Golden Grove.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, this report shows that taxpayers' moneys are to be spent legitimately and those elected are to serve genuinely.

Madam Speaker, under this reform expect to see secure funding. Local government bodies will no longer have to ask and beg and plead. Executive authority, why can we not want for our local colleagues the same that we want for ourselves?—new responsibilities, school maintenance, social welfare, sporting programmes. And, Madam Speaker, I heard about the box drains and I can tell you, many of those contractors are currently waiting their turn in court. Madam Speaker, we need more effective municipal policing. With broader responsibilities and more staff we can strengthen the system. Madam Speaker, the infrastructure works, as a Member of Parliament there is very little I can do without the help and support of my local government colleagues and it is important to me in order for

me to represent well that they are able to represent well. And, Madam Speaker, when we speak about disaster management, every single local government practitioner here would know we are indeed the first responders and with the strength of local government reform they will get the support that they need. But the organization and structure and the new local government ecosystem, local consuls will continue operating using a committee system.

As Mayor of Arima I was the chairman of finance and I am hoping that, Madam Speaker, that everyone in the future will be judicious and careful with the spending of public money. You see, at the end of the day it would be tighter fiscal control. And, Madam Speaker, extending the term from three years to four years is brilliant because by the time you find your feet in one year there is the second year and election in the third year. Give our colleagues the opportunity to shine, to do the work, to not study elections as much as study service.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Madam Speaker, the UNC's mantra in the past has been, "serve the people, serve the people, serve the people". What has changed? Is it that it is impossible to locate people that genuinely want to serve? No, Madam Speaker, this local government reform report, it will serve the people. Local government is the salt of the earth; they deserve all the support that central government can give it.

Madam Speaker, the concrete manifestation of a PNM vision. Since 1962 we have been taking our time, all different governments, all the representatives and in here, 2022, we have the opportunity to make it right. Let us focus on the people that need it the most. Let us not quibble and fight and nitpick. Let us put our colleagues first.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Let us not use councillors to do our dirty work and dirty deeds. In fact, Madam Speaker, let us encourage them to rise above it and to understand, yellow or red, your duty is to genuinely serve the people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: The whole point of local government reform, Madam Speaker, is not just to encourage and support our colleagues, it is to improve the work that is given. It is to make sure that the vulnerable receive the help that they need. It is to ensure that we in central government are aware that our colleagues are working not for us but for the people.

I was proud to serve as a “J’arime” Mayor of Arima and five out of seven seats in the Arima council is D’Abadie/O’Meara. So that means we are committed to ensuring that this process, these people, our colleagues move forward local government reform. And if it is you do not want them to do well then shame on you, shame on you, shame on you. Let us pass and let us move forward and let us put the councillors, the aldermen, the mayors, the chairmen first for once. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Chaguanas East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate of the Report of the Joint Select Committee on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020. Madam Speaker, as I begin, let me place on the record that Members of this side on that very Joint Select Committee would have expressed our reservations vide in a Minority Report submitted, expressing our non-support based on a list of concerns. And you would have heard today the Member for Arouca/Maloney listed

those concerns, the Minister of local government listed those concerns and despite our position there were no further consultations, nor communication to address the very areas of concerns. And here we are here today debating and the speaker before, and various speakers on the other side during the course of today would have mentioned that—in particular, the Member for Arouca/Maloney, mentioned that she rejects what was placed in that Minority Report by the Opposition. And if the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara is saying that she is local government and local government is her, let us on this side state that ejecting the Minority Report is rejecting representation of the people.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And, Madam Speaker, as I relate to consultations as it is stated on page 332 of the Minority Report listed in the report of the JSC, I want to refer to the Ministry of local government's website where it was stated that—and it is still there if you visit that website that:

“...one public consultation in each of the fourteen (14) municipal corporations, as well as one consultation in Tobago.”

And, Madam Speaker, we are saying consultations, yes, because one consultation in each municipal corporation and seven years later you are here. Was one sufficient, Madam Speaker? And, Madam Speaker, yet you would see that when local government elections are due, and you would have heard other Members saying that today, in approximately six months we are here to debate the said report.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Arouca/Maloney would have rejected our Minority Report which spoke about equity and if you are to reject that then you are not concerned about equity within the municipalities as it relates to the minority, because we on this side are not speaking about PNM, UNC, we are speaking about

Ms. Mohit (cont'd)

those representatives across the board. Because you cannot go up for an election, fight an election, walk the streets, meet persons, then sit in a council and you do not get an equitable share as it relates to representing your citizens, your residents or your burgesses within your various municipalities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: And, Madam Speaker, we must be cognizant of the fact that PNM in the 2015 general election campaign would have strongly advocated for local government reform as a crucial plank to service delivery and seven years after you are now ready to deal with it.

I can recall, Madam Speaker, then Minister Kazim Hosein saying, “Reform is coming”. Every meeting you have with the Minister, “Reform is coming”, as though it was coming tomorrow, each and every problem or issue listed and stating that this will be a flagship project each and every time the issue of funding, the issue of employment, staffing, et cetera, came up in his presence. So, Madam Speaker, clearly this is for appeasement to say that the Government is doing something six months before the local government election. And, Madam Speaker, the Member for Arouca/Maloney mentioned that this reform would help local government practitioners and municipalities to determine their own destinies. Madam Speaker, today I say that local government representatives and different municipalities have been determining their own destinies since they have to work themselves to empower themselves among their groups because of the lack of resources within their municipalities. Because, Madam Speaker, what this Government has created is a culture where councillors in some cases have to hide because they have had so many excuses as it relates to the services to be provided by the corporation due to lack of funding.

So, Madam Speaker, as it relates to concerns, the first concern will be

whether these provisions articulated in the report will be implemented for the new council in November/December 2022, and, Madam Speaker, the answer is definitely, no. So then, what is the urge to introduce since these new measures will not be available? Because, Madam Speaker, since on the passage of the Municipal Corporations Act, 21 of 1990, there has always been reform and I can tell you, Madam Speaker, as a former local government practitioner the existing legislation has been workable but with continuous changes happening of course within municipalities, I will not be dogmatic and say, “No changes should be made.” But what I can say, Madam Speaker, is what is or has been lacking is central government’s failure to empower local government bodies through funding, staffing and general resource allocation, Madam Speaker, because these are the major, major, major aspects of service delivery within the municipal corporations. And when you hear—today I listened to the Minister of local government and I would like to ask, who fooled the Minister of local government that people are out there begging for local government reform? Madam Speaker, do you know what people are out there begging for? Begging for the funding to be provided to their local government representatives—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit:—so they can provide the services required for the citizens, residents, burgesses within the various municipalities.

Madam Speaker, you know why the grass is high?—because there is no funding to fix equipment to go out into those areas.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. V. Mohit: That is why the grass is high, because of the lack of funding. Madam Speaker, as I move on I will say that, when the Act was first promulgated there were concerns on its operationalization, the then PNM Government

established a Cabinet-appointed committee in 1994, commonly called the Soogrim Committee, which reported on measures to operationalize the Act. Madam Speaker, today, 28 years later, most of the recommendations have not been implemented. You heard a lot about the history today but you did not hear about this and what has happened because of that?—the lack of implementation of those recommendations. The situation has worsened, thus stifling local government bodies and making them impotent to discharge their functions.

Madam Speaker, let us not forget that the period 2003 to 2010, that period was characterized by intense reform agenda leading to the suspension of local government elections for a number of years, and hence you would have heard colleague for Barataria/San Juan pleading and making the plight of hence the reason it should be constitutionally protected. Madam Speaker, a mere 30 years after its enactment the PNM sought to dispense with legislation, Act 21 of 1990, and create new legislative agenda. So, they are reforming again from 2015 to 2022, which is this current Bill. Madam Speaker, what guarantee is there that this Bill will be more effective than the Act 21 of 1990?—because in the consultation held in Chaguanas, Madam Speaker, the late Minister Franklin Khan, himself, in the consultation after receiving the remarks by persons participating would have said—these were his words:

“...he would accept a 70% plus readiness, as ‘nit-picking’ on every single aspect will get nothing done and it could never be 100% right.”

So what guarantee is there that this Bill will be more effective than the Act 21 of 1990?

Madam Speaker, I want to focus a little bit on social services, which we heard about vaguely throughout today, as it is contained in this report. For quite a long time, representation has been advanced for municipal bodies to determine

recipients of social services since representatives would have first-hand knowledge of the residents' income and social status. Madam Speaker, a strange arrangement is conceived in this Report wherein at 35H(1) of page 284 speaks of a:

“...Division...with responsibility for Community Development and Social Services...”

And further, 35H(1)(d), states inter alia:

“assisting...the implementation of Central Government social policies and programmes;”

However, Madam Speaker, when one peruses the Thirteenth Schedule on page 315, “Areas of Responsibility of a Municipal Corporation”, absolutely no mention is made of social services there, Madam Speaker.

So let us even accept that this might be an oversight in terms of this omission. So what is the reality of this measure, Madam Speaker? Again:

The absence of proper consultation—
—as stated on page 332 in the Minority Report:

The absence of proper consultation, research and analysis were compromised for simply presenting a report.

And, Madam Speaker, I want to refer to the website, news.gov.tt, where to this date a meeting was held between the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development as well as the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, April 17th; April 17th, Madam Speaker, and the discussions would have involved capacity building, training, recruitment, staffing, accommodation, change management culture, and at this end on this particular website, news.gov.tt, you would see that both Ministries agreed that there was need for further dialogue and to continue to work together to ensure that there is a clear understanding of what is required for the transition to local government reform.

Madam Speaker, since then we are to ask: What type of other consultation since 2017 would have taken place between the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development and the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services? And, Madam Speaker, what you would note is that the reality of this measure is that the local boards within the social development Ministry are configured by districts and therefore their geographical boundaries are not in alignment with municipal corporation boundaries. So, consequently, Madam Speaker, such a measure will be chaotic and unstructured, because if we are to look at the disaster units within municipalities we are already faced with shortcomings as it relates to the liaison between departments in providing efficient services to our citizens between the disaster management units of municipal bodies and the social services Ministry.

Madam Speaker, it must also be remembered that this very reform initiative was ventilated in the 2003 to 2010 period and it was agreed that all government agencies would undertake their functions and deliveries who terminus with that of the geographical boundaries of corporations. For example, the Ministry of Works Caroni districts—Caroni districts—sorry, Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Works Caroni district and other Ministries and their services, if you notice, are still configured along the old county council boundaries. So this is what I refer to as it relates to the social development Ministry and transitioning into this local government reform. So, if the Ministry of Works and other Ministries are still operating under the county council boundaries, how would this work into the local government reform?

Madam Speaker, what I can is such a measure as currently existing is a recipe for chaos for community development, sports, tourism and social services, because, Madam Speaker, to the best of my knowledge the CSO is probably the

only agency to conduct its surveys in alignment with the municipal corporation boundaries. And what would this cause as it relates to the Ministries of social development and local government? This will only further exacerbate the hardship of recipients who are constantly subjected to challenges. For example, recently we saw stolen cheques, et cetera, in accessing their measly pittances.

I want to refer to the consultation held in Chaguanas where the Minister of local government, the late Franklin Khan, himself, would have stated that:

“We have spent almost \$30 billion in the last ten (10) years to deliver social services to...underprivileged and those in need and it ain't help the poor people you know. There is still poverty in Trinidad that is not commensurate...”—to—“...the amount of money we spend on social services because everything is seeping through a crack and is seeping through inefficiencies and in some cases, corruption.”

So this, Madam Speaker—therefore, I am taking this opportunity to urge the Government to ensure that this measure be reviewed for a seamless transition of service delivery as it relates to both Ministries.

Madam Speaker, and let us not forget and let us be mindful that since COVID-19 the pivotal roles played by social services, members of the municipal corporations as it relates to affected citizens. Madam Speaker, as I look to conclude, I would say that the report on the Bill clearly demonstrates that the proposed reformative measure is at best ill-conceived and cannot be implemented in the current context of local government. This cosmetic tinkering with subsisted legislation cannot be the solution to problems plaguing local government bodies, hence the reason for us placing in our minority report the need for further consultations.

Madam Speaker, I would like to take this opportunity to also highlight some

areas for improvement and would hope that the new Minister of local government would bring new ideas and novel solutions to the historic problems of local government bodies. And, Madam Speaker, I wish to briefly identify a few areas, one, that is devise an equitable formula for financing municipal bodies, since 78(2) of the Report cannot sustain some corporations. And when I say that, Madam Speaker, what do I mean?—revenue from property tax; the housing stock is not the same in all municipal corporations. The housing stock in Point Fortin may not be the same as Chaguanas so therefore devising an equitable formula as it relates to financing and funding for corporations is necessary. Madam Speaker, and in consultations held you would see then Minister Franklin Khan would have spoken in detail about inadequate funding as it relates to municipal corporations.

Madam Speaker, I would like to also see advice be given on the quantum of staffing required to enable this new Bill and the anticipated costing, because, Madam President, remember at this time there is a freeze on employment which is in effect. And some corporations at this time, or for some years now have no WS III, road officers, public health officers, et cetera, to carry out the functions within the corporation to ensure that estimates—draft estimates reach the Ministry of local government, go to the Ministry of Finance on time so that corporations can receive their funding. I can recall, before leaving Chaguanas as a mayor, pleading with the Minister of local government for a WS III and up to now they still do not have that WS III. So, advise on the quantum of staffing.

Madam Speaker, as it relates to architecture for this reform Bill, indicate when the architecture for this reform Bill will be implemented as it relates to systems, staffing, structure, since this cannot be envisaged for November/December 2022. Madam Speaker, as well as regularizing the anarchy operating under two separate commissions, and you would have heard the Member

for Barataria/San Juan speaking about the Statutory Authorities Service Commission (SASC), a creation of Cabinet and the Public Service Commission (PSC), a creature of the Constitution. In addition, Madam Speaker, the issue of incentivizing corporations to generate revenue and subject to due diligence used for their overall development as added benefits, meaning their development programmes, et cetera.

In addition, Madam Speaker, the establishment of a municipal court, bearing in mind the number of sections that carry fines, charges or penalties. This is, Madam Speaker, so that local government matters in the courts of T&T can be expedited, whether it is one day per week—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Ms. V. Mohit:—in the district courts, et cetera.

Madam Speaker:—is municipal courts part of the report?

Ms. V. Mohit: It is just a recommendation.

Madam Speaker: No. What we are debating here and—

Ms. V. Mohit: As it relates to fines.

Madam Speaker: We are debating the report.

Ms. V. Mohit: Yeah.

Madam Speaker: Okay? So that all the policy positions should have been covered—

Ms. V. Mohit: Sure.

Madam Speaker:—in the Committee.

Ms. V. Mohit: Yeah.

Madam Speaker: Okay? So whatever you say it must be related to something in the report.

Ms. V. Mohit: And, Madam Speaker, I was just tying that in as it relates to the

finances, et cetera, and policies relating to the cremation, the recreation facilities, et cetera, in terms of fines and penalties, et cetera—all right? And, Madam Speaker, as it relates to the funding which was debated here today, the guaranteed funding for local government bodies to ensure service delivery to residents.

3.30 p.m.

For example, block releases in terms of scavenging for a period of time, rather than corporations having to await releases, et cetera, to pay debts, and they end up indebted to contractors, et cetera, for a period of time, and they have to jostle their resources when they receive.

Madam Speaker, as it relates to expanded roles and responsibilities, as listed in the report, corporations and municipalities would therefore require a lot more accommodation. You would have heard the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government speaking about legal affairs and birth certificates, et cetera. The ensuring of construction of administrative complexes in all municipalities. So, for example, Chaguanas, all functions take place in one spot because of the administrative complex, and you would see as a part of the lead up to all of this, they would have had a legal affairs unit.

Madam Speaker: Again, I caution you with the same thing. Building of buildings is certainly not in the report. Accommodation is not in the report.

Ms. V. Mohit: Madam Speaker, I was just tying it into—

Madam Speaker: I heard what you said, and I said I hope you will take the guidance.

Ms. V. Mohit: Moving on to my final point, as it relates to roles and functions, in terms of the practitioners' perspective embracing TTALGA, which is in the report as well.

So, Madam Speaker, those were some of the recommendations, and with

that being said I would look to conclude and state that based on what the Minister of Finance has said, I would take this opportunity in our contribution to this local government reform Bill, to say as a local government practitioner previously, thanks to the hon. Member for Siparia and the Leader of the Opposition, that I could have lived and worked through the local government system. So that when the Minister of Finance can come to school me and school us about intellect in local government, I can tell him, even being the local government Minister for a period of time did not teach him, the Minister of Finance, enough about local government, and you are the one who lacks intellect, not us.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Tunapuna.

Mr. Esmond Forde (*Tunapuna*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to enter this debate this afternoon on this very important report, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020.

I myself, Madam Speaker, have been a local government practitioner at the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation for a period of five years, from 2010 to 2015, under the People's National Movement as the councillor for Auzonville/Tunapuna. From 2013 to 2015, I was elevated to be the Vice-Chairman of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. So I think today I have an input within this report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. E. Forde: I must give sincere appreciation to our Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, for granting me the opportunity in order to serve on this particular committee, along with the Leader of Government Business, Minister Camille Robinson-Regis, for giving me the opportunity to be on this Joint Select Committee for Local Government Reform.

Additionally, I would like to thank the outgoing Minister, Sen. Kazim Hosein for an excellent job within the last couple of years. A Minister, a practitioner himself, being a former Mayor and employee at the San Fernando Corporation. You would have heard him mention he visited all corporations. He has meetings with all chairmen and he is a man always on the ground getting the job done.

I would also like to thank Mr. Franklin Khan also—may his soul rest in peace—for his stint as the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government during the period of the consultations, and where all and most of the work would have been done. But remember, the work would have started some over 30 years ago with regard to local government reform.

At this time, Madam Speaker, I would just like to bring to the attention, one or two comments made by those on the opposite side, and to remind the Member for Chaguanas East that there were 512,000 burgesses interactions, both physically and virtually, as mentioned by the present Rural Development and Local Government Minister, Faris Al-Rawi. There would have been 15 consultations between the period December 2015 to April 2016 resulting in the above interactions, and that would have been just for the five-month period dealing with this particular report.

So we can see the logic in bringing this Bill at this time, because we need the provisions to be put in place to ensure that we bring local government to the individuals, to the communities, to the residents, to the burgesses of all the various communities.

My good colleague, Member for Couva South, you know, we can boast on this side that we have some practitioners too, and I think once we list our practitioners it is chalk and cheese. Starting with the present Minister of Rural

Development and Local Government, Faris Al-Rawi. He started off also in local government. We have a former chairman and councillor, MP Symon de Nobriga, also a local government practitioner. My colleague who would have spoken a little while ago, mayor, councillor, Lisa Morris-Julien, and we know of her track record. She was born into local government and governance of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. E. Forde: We have Roger Munroe, our new-minted MP for Sangre Grande. He also started off as an alderman in the Sangre Grande Corporation. Kennedy Richards, Mayor, councillor. Your side cannot stand alongside these individuals. I understand that Penelope Beckles also would have started—

Madam Speaker: Just remember, Member, you are referring to people here either by their constituencies or their offices.

Mr. E. Forde: My apologies, I should know better. Member of Parliament for Arima and, of course, yours truly Esmond Forde, a former councillor and also vice-chairman of the Tunapuna Regional Corporation. But what is most important is that all of them are present in the Chamber today. All of them are present in the Chamber today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. E. Forde: My colleague, the Member of Parliament for St. Augustine, you know, mentioned about the property tax, and the Member used the word “dreaded”— I mean, “dreaded property tax”. I contemplated, should I repeat it? Should I make mention of it? When I say, we live in houses within Trinidad and Tobago, we have properties. Not only us in this Chamber here, but throughout Trinidad and Tobago, and for years I grew up in a home hearing my father and mother saying that they have to pay property tax every year. So, again, property tax is important so, again, not that word please.

Town meetings versus consultations. Again, consultations, town meetings, meetings, however you want to term it, but there were consultations, 15 of them in all, 14 in Trinidad, and the persons were engaged, again, by Member of Parliament for St. Augustine. Even former MP Trevor Sudama was present. There were also present Members of Parliament who are presently Members of this honourable Chamber, MP Saddam Hosein, MP Khadijah Ameen even spoke of attending 10 of these sessions, and the MP who just spoke, MP Vandana Mohit, MP for Chaguanas East, was also present at those consultations.

So, again, recommendations were asked for, suggestions were asked for. You all had the opportunity to make those presentations, not today when the Bill is being presented before the House, when the report is being presented before the House. You had numerous opportunities. You all were members of the Joint Select Committee where all those recommendations could have been made.

So, Madam Speaker, local government reform basically will involve the devolution of the power and authority to the cities, the boroughs, the municipalities and the various corporations throughout Trinidad. We on this side believe that there are several tasks and functions now managed by the central Government that can be more effectively handled by local government bodies, especially social services and community development functions. Additionally, we see no need for a Ministry of Local Government. We believe that a regional and municipal corporation should have a direct relationship with the Ministry of Finance, similar in manner to the Tobago House of Assembly, to ensure adequacy of funding, and they should be given the autonomy to develop and implement their own regional policies, plans and programmes within the framework of the national policy.

To ensure no job losses, the staff in the Ministry of local government will be redeployed within the Ministry of Finance and the municipal corporations as

required.

Madam Speaker, the Municipal Corporations Act will be further amended in paragraph 9 by inserting a new section, 35A, which will list responsibilities for administrative division of the corporations. It is clearly identified, the various divisions, a division for corporate services, a division for finance and allocation of resources. If we go to the particular Act, it is clearly stated, the division of finance:

“(a) assisting in strategic planning exercises, as well as monitoring the execution of strategic plans;”

They can assist with:

“(b) undertaking budgetary and financial planning;

(c) procuring goods and services and equipment...

(d) collecting and formulating and analysing data of an economic nature...

(e) keeping accurate inventory...”

So that is one of the divisions.

We could also highlight a division for recreation grounds and public spaces. We have been hearing a lot today about the recreation spaces. But each corporation receives their funding. Each corporation has the various opportunities in order to vire funding, in order to seek from the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government or the Ministry of Finance, in order to transfer funds to get services done. So if an important commodity as diesel for trucks in order to ensure that the work gets done, you on the other side have no passion for local government, no passion whatsoever.

Again, recreational grounds need to cut, again, virement, transfer of funds can take place in order to ensure that the duties and services are carried out. The recreation grounds, sporting and exercising facilities, right.

That division will be responsible for:

“developing, maintaining and managing...recreation grounds, sporting and exercising facilities and other public spaces...”

They would be involved in:

“construction and installing sporting and exercise facilities...developing policy for usage...”

Not to say, Madam Speaker, that those things are not being done at present, because from the corporation—Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation where I was birthed, those things are happening, those things are happening. So those on the other side, come better than that please. Please, Members.

Another important division would be the division of health. We know of the importance of sanitation, the importance of rodent control, of canines. That particular division, public health, sanitation and the environment, they would be responsible for:

“developing and promoting strategies for community hygiene;”

Two, they will be responsible for:

“ensuring the distribution of water in areas requested subject to the Water and Sewerage Act;”

And, thirdly, they will be involved in “recycling initiatives”, and other strategies in order to ensure management of insect vector, rodents and other health issues within the community. So, Madam Speaker, that is one particular aspect which is important in the changing of this particular—of bringing this Motion at this particular time.

With regard to health, the clause at paragraph (z) would amend section 43 of the Municipal Corporations Act:

“...to provide for the change of title from ‘Medical Officer of Health’ to ‘Municipal Director of Health’.”

Simple as it is. This:

“...clause at paragraph (aa) would insert after section 43 of the MCA, new sections 43A and 43B.”

This:

“New section, 43A would provide for the Municipal Corporation working in conjunction with the Insect Vector Control Division of the Ministry of Health...”

We know of the abandoned lots situated throughout most communities, where a lot of residents, whether residing locally or abroad, not maintaining their properties. So the various corporations have to go in, maintain these properties and sometimes we may have issues with regard to ensuring that we are given permission to get on the property. So, again, with this new arrangement, the medical officer, working along with Insect Vector Control, would be able to alleviate these situations.

I can now also speak about the property tax, a very important aspect, where the clause at paragraph (ak) would insert after section 75 of the MCA to provide:

“...for the interpretation of words used in the Part, such as Property Tax Act, taxes and residential land;”

As previously mentioned by the Minister of Finance and also the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, this provision would provide for the corporations to collect and also keep the particular taxes received from these residential taxes. The Minister quoted a figure of \$30million. Wow, \$30 million to the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation would suffice, would assist with regard to ensuring that we get the job done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. E. Forde: Local government is about providing services to the community. It

is not about making excuses. It is not about the councillors saying no funding, but at least corporations and municipalities would now have a cushion in order to start off their operations, and they can still look to the Minister of Finance for further funding.

In terms of accountability, Madam Speaker, the Municipal Corporations Act: “...would be further amended in paragraph (a) to amend section 108 of the MCA to now require Councils to submit yearly estimates of expenditure for the Corporation to the Minister of Finance directly...”

They would be sending that information directly to the Minister of Finance, rather than through the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government. All the red tape, all the necessary bureaucracies will then be eliminated.

With regard to—again, and I quote directly from the Act, Part V, “Property Tax”, section 76:

“‘Act’ means the Property Tax Act, 2009;

‘taxes’ means taxes on assessed land liable to be paid under the Act;”

And it identified the various ones:

“(a) vacant or unoccupied lands with or without a building...

(b) land that has affixed to it, a building or other dwelling which has the physical characteristics that enable it to be occupied or capable of occupation as a residence or for residential occupation and is used and occupied on a permanent basis as a single dwelling accommodation and includes complementary outbuildings;...”—et cetera, et cetera.

So, again, 78(1):

“A Municipal Corporation shall be responsible for the collection of property taxes in relation to residential land within...”—the particular municipality.

The Corporation Fund, another aspect of revenue earning. The clause at

paragraph (ao) would be amended in section 109 of the Municipal Corporations Act:

“...which provides for every Corporation, a Statutory Fund to be known by its corporate name.”

The clause further includes:

“...new subsections 1A and 1B which would provide for what the money of the corporation fund shall comprise and allows for section 43(3) of the Exchequer and Audit Act to apply to the Corporation Fund...”

So, again, the funds being received by the corporation would have to be identified clearly, within the Corporation Fund, under the particular name at the respective corporation to ensure accountability of all funds being received.

Additionally, Madam Speaker:

“The clause at paragraph (aq) would amend section 112 of the Act to provide for the application of Corporate Funds. Subparagraph (i) would include “parks” in the areas of responsibility for which monies from a Corporation Fund will be spent.”

Which is to say, that this same subparagraph will also be removed, and paragraph (e) of section 112 would cater for parks, for pitch walks—you know what we call “jogging tracks” around the various savannahs—rails and benches around all parks, savannahs, within the various municipalities.

So now the corporations will have the responsibility to identify those commodities, those equipment that need repairs, and it can be taken out with regard to the Consolidated Fund. Likewise for cremation sites, paragraph (f) will also be changed. Paragraph (k) and paragraph (l) with regard to disaster management. You know, the idea of waiting for the ODPM, the idea of waiting for the Minister of Local Government and Rural Development, the idea of waiting for

the defence force and the coast guard, and all these individuals in order to mobilize. The corporation now will be able to have access to funds where they can utilize their first respondents with regard to disaster management and, yes we know we can fall back on the ODPM department. So this will cater for all of that, the expenses, the various sums voted for by the council and getting the approval by the Minister of Finance.

All aspects and services of local government have been taken into consideration with regard to this form Bill, and hats off to again our previous Attorney General in the legislation, putting forward this legislation, ensuring that most of the reforms with regard to local government are taken into consideration.

Another aspect of revenue source, coming in again through the local government, comes within clause at paragraph (br), would be amended in section 220 of the Municipal Corporations Act:

“...to allow a Municipal Police Officer to issue tickets...”—yes, issue traffic tickets—“under the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Enforcement and Administration) Act, Chap. 48:52.”

What better can we want? So, which is to say, that you got a ticket in the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation region, the funds from that ticket will be placed within the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. For those on the other side, if it happens in Chaguanas, in Couva, in Tabaquite, likewise individuals would have to pay the tickets and the funds will go, and to quote directly from the Act:

“A Municipal Police Officer may issue fixed penalty tickets under the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Enforcement and Administration) Act.”

And this will be inserted after section 224 following the new section. So, again, additional revenue in order that the regional corporation can use as a cushion, can

use as an initial investment and income to start off operations as we go along within the local government reform. Remember, local government is bringing governance to the people of the various communities.

We are also important about meeting the community needs within the various communities, and the clause at paragraph (bu) would amend section 232 of the Municipal Corporations Act:

“...which provides for homes for the aged and child-care centres established by the Corporation, to now include a new function of development. The clause further seeks to provide for maintenance of State property including police station, health centres, post offices, other government buildings...schools and sporting facilities.”

Again, those on the other side, all the wealth of experience that you all have as councillors, those services are provided as we speak in the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. I can speak for the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. I can speak for the region where I have served for a period of five years as a councillor and as a vice-chairman of the corporation.

Yes, services can be provided, whether it is the maintenance of the police station yard. A simple thing as providing whackering services, of getting rid of the various debris, cutting of trees, trimming of trees, all those aspects can be performed at these various corporations. But now we are making it legitimate, meaning that it is being legislated to ensure that there are no excuses for these services to be provided at the various corporations and municipalities throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, quoting directly from the Act, the clause at paragraph (bu) would amend section 232 of the Act, “which provides for homes for the aged and child-care centres established” under the corporation in order to ensure that the

communal needs of the various communities are met on a daily basis.

We have been hearing about persons and the human resource aspect, persons may lose their jobs, who will be hired, who will be fired, and those various things, but in the Act it is also stated in section 34 at (n), it clearly states under subsection (iii) where they will be inserting after section 34 the following new sections which reads:

“34A.(1) A Corporation shall provide for the establishment and maintenance of a pension scheme for its contracted, permanent and daily rated employees.”

Someone on the other side, some one of my colleagues, one of my esteemed colleagues on the other side mentioned about individuals being retrenched, and not being able to transfer their pension and things like that, but it is catered for in this new Bill, Madam Speaker.

Section 34A(1) reads:

“A Corporation shall provide for the establishment and maintenance of a pension scheme or arrange for membership in a scheme for its contracted, permanent and daily rated employees.

- (2) Without prejudice to subsection (1) a Corporation may, under a pension scheme—
- (a) establish contributory...schemes and establish and contribute to...funds for the benefit of its employee;
 - (b) grant gratuities, pensions or...allowances to the surviving spouse, families or dependents of its employee;
 - (c) enter into and carry into effect arrangements...”—and allowances, along those lines.

So, again, the human resource aspects are being catered for and are being covered

within this particular Bill.

Madam Speaker, benefits and advantages of local government reform. As a local government practitioner, it is important to spell it out clearly what are the benefits and advantages of this new legislation. One, all regional corporations would be empowered to acquire their own financing. The reform allows for regional corporations the ability to retain certain taxes collected within their respective areas. The source of revenue will give regional corporations all resources needed to carry out the burgesses' business effectively.

Secondly, the Municipal Corporations Act will be amended to give regional corporations executive authority and autonomy similar to that of the Tobago House of Assembly. We have a template that is working well in Tobago at the THA, so why not replicate it in Trinidad for our local government practitioners? This will reduce the level of interference from central government in determining the affairs of the local government bodies, all 14 municipalities.

Thirdly, local government bodies will be responsible for the school maintenance, social welfare services, sporting programmes as well as agricultural and local tourism. Excellent idea.

Fourthly, local government bodies will be responsible for developing the competencies, expertise and facilities that will create opportunities for local work to be done by local suppliers of goods and services within the particular municipality.

4.00 p.m.

Which is to say, in Tunapuna—in Auzonville, Tunapuna, we have contractors, they are registered legally. They are registered to the regional corporation for services and jobs to be performed within the Tunapuna area. Preferences will be given to those individuals; likewise in Princes Town, likewise

in Siparia, likewise in Arima or Sangre Grande, local contractors will be given the benefits.

The ability to fully participate in the planning and development of communities will be expanded beyond approval of plans and construction of dwelling houses and simple dwellings, again, taking away some of the responsibilities from Town and Country Planning; likewise now at the corporations they will be able to utilize their services as they go along.

Number six, local government bodies will be reformed to facilitate direct collaboration with central government agencies to plan for and become effective first responders in natural disasters. We know of flooding issues. We know of situations that may occur that would need those first responders. So, the corporation will put together their team and send out their first responders until ODPM and other agencies will show up.

Number seven, broader responsibilities for staff will be given to municipal police, closing the gap between the community and officers of the law, which means that the municipal police will work along in tandem with the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to ensure that all areas and communities benefit from adequate policing.

Number eight, foster and create a formal consultative process and forum where NGOs, CBOs and other civil society get involved. So, the chambers, the police youth clubs, the sport clubs, the various entities throughout the community, cultural groups and so on, could now be part of the whole regional corporation and their desires as they ensure that the communities benefit.

Utilize the derailed—detailed, sorry, regional development plans prepared for the 14 municipal corporations under the previous PNM Government. And we would have heard the Minister of Finance, you know, give a full detail with regard

to the former Minister back then, over 15 years ago, Minister—former Minister Mrs. Hazel Manning and the job and work that she would have done during that period. So, again, Madam Speaker, as I come down to a close, we have been hearing a lot about consultations.

Madam Speaker: You have one more minute.

Mr. E. Forde: One more minute. Okay. Right. You would have been hearing about consultations. But the whole aspect is, how do you want to see local government in your community? That is the question to be asked and the question to be answered. And the answers are, one, accountability. We must be able to give stewardship. Two, transparency, being honest. Three, equity. Equal share for all. Democracy must involve participatory from the community. Security, we need to feel safe. Six, the political will. Just get it done. Greater authority, who is responsible. Once you know who is responsible, you will be able to give a greater clarity in order to know who to go to get account. Empowered communities involving engagement from the ground up. Integrity, your character. And very important, Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to enter this debate. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Moruga/Tableland.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Michelle Benjamin (*Moruga/Tableland*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to join this debate. Madam Speaker, as the former councillor for Hindustan/St. Mary's and the now Member of Parliament for the constituency of Moruga/Tableland, I am pleased to present today my submissions on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill. Madam Speaker, firstly I would like to begin by thanking the Member for

regurgitating the Bill.

Madam Speaker, this Bill before us today is of special concern to me as I represent an area of our nation, like many of our rural communities, that is totally ignored by the present administration. Local government is in need of reformation and we owe it to our citizens to implement a robust and comprehensive plan that properly enables them, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, when we listen to the contribution of the Members on the other side, what we are being sold are dreams. Madam Speaker, as a former local government practitioner, I could tell you of my first term in council, my first physical infrastructure meeting. Madam Speaker, when it was my turn to give general business, I would have stood with my campaign diary. This is a diary that I would have gone from street to street, home to home and every home had a complaint, every street had a complaint. Everything was properly documented, Madam Speaker. And when I raised my complaints in that council hall, Madam Speaker, it was over 77. I remember this clearly. I was told to choose four and prioritize because the council has no resources or the funding allocated to your district, you are lucky if you would have completed two, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, so I say that dreams are being sold here today.

Madam Speaker, some years ago, I remember that in this country the PNM Government refused to call local government elections. But they here today preaching about reform. Seven odd years they would have penalized the citizens of this country, a purposeful postponement, Madam Speaker, to spite the people of this nation. I recall feeling that I had to do something, Madam Speaker, to fight against this oppression. I also recall that it was only when the Member for Siparia became the Prime Minister that she restored their democratic rights when she called the local government elections.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: It was because of her act that I stand before you here today, Madam Speaker, and I would like to thank the Member for Siparia for her loyalty to this nation and the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin: As a former councillor, I know all too well the challenges of the administration of local government. I know first-hand the difficulties and challenges that local government representatives face on a daily basis. Councillors are first responders or the first point of contact, which means you are the first person that citizens lament their issues with, with bad roads, poor drainage, landslips, lack of water and health hazards, and the list goes on and on. Madam Speaker, but I will go so far to say that you are the first point of contact where persons take their frustrations out on.

Local government representatives, we are also referred to as first responders during crisis, Madam Speaker. And I would have listened to the Member talk about the Disaster Management Unit. Madam Speaker, I will paint a picture in the Princes Town Regional Corporation where the Disaster Management Unit is basically four persons to man three constituencies, 10 electoral districts. Madam Speaker, one vehicle. Madam Speaker, we have beachfront. Madam Speaker, so I say dreams are being painted here today but the proof is in the pudding.

Madam Speaker, my community is faced with floods. Madam Speaker, we have several landslip issues but yet we are hearing that \$30 million is coming. We will see, Madam Speaker. And this is the most tragic irony, that they starved the corporation for resources when it is literally a matter of life and death in most instances. Madam Speaker, there are many on the opposite side here today that bad roads and poor drainage, dilapidated bridges are nothing but an inconvenience. But

for the people of Moruga/Tableland, it is a reduce in taxi services. In my community it means no bus services. Madam Speaker, it means that sometimes you cannot go to and from work. Madam Speaker, it means that sometimes ambulances do not arrive on time to save lives. Madam Speaker, it means if you have an emergency, it will deter the time you reach to the hospital. Madam Speaker, it means that sometimes fire appliances cannot find your home to save anything if there should be a fire. Madam Speaker, it also means sometimes you cannot access police stations. So, Madam Speaker, it is a matter of life and death. This is what local government services, the lack of it, the lack of resources mean to my constituents.

Sadly, Madam Speaker, in this Bill, I see nothing that is serious about local government reform. I see nothing that will improve the lives of my constituents. This is a Bill that has nothing to do with reforming local government or to better the lives of the people. Rather, it is a Bill anchored at reforming image, the image of the Government that is bursting at its seams, Madam Speaker, because we have elections in the air.

What is wrong with this Bill? Like the country's leadership, Madam Speaker, it is management. But it would seem that the PNM Government's understanding of management is the complete political control of everything. Madam Speaker, when you look at clause 3(f) of the Bill, the Minister is being given responsibility for determining remuneration and allowances. Madam Speaker, and I know this was reiterated here today.

It is for the allowances of the mayors, councillors and aldermen to be paid under a new corporation fund. Madam Speaker, may I remind the Government that we have a Statutory Authorities Act and several state entities already in place to determine the terms and conditions and salaries of these state-run enterprises. Why

are we not utilizing the mechanisms already in place? The PNM Government likes to play control, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this absolutist control approach has not and will never address the ill of an administration system that is slow at every stage in the country. But we cannot achieve anything by sidestepping the system or implementing new legislation every time without fixing the present issues. Why do we not have the benefit of a report that diagnoses the issues in each regional corporation so that we will know what is happening, Madam Speaker, or will the Minister inform us on how he intends to treat with our public officers running on interim contracts? The Bill does not present solutions to fix our ongoing issues. Instead the issues are sidestepped to allow political interference of the Minister.

We have state entities mandated under the Act. Moreover, Madam Speaker, the Bill seeks to extend the complement of staff, as under section 34, new subsection (2). However, the reform that is needed is on the ground rather than on paper, Madam Speaker. The Municipal Corporations Act will undergo various name changes and additions, as you heard the Member regurgitated a while ago, to allow the employment of new staff which might sound positive and I endorse new employment. However, there are workers in the corporations who have been waiting for umpteenth years, more than 20 years, in some instances, to be regularized and receive benefits.

We have numerous instances where employees in the corporations do jobs additional to their substantive posts, if they even have one, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, sometimes they are overqualified, undertrained, unqualified, whatever the case is; positions that they will not receive a pension or any other benefits for the position they are currently executing. Why have any of these amendments not address the concerns of the staff, the stakeholders, the people on

the ground, the people actually doing the work? Madam Speaker, you know what it is to retire working at one position and being told you would not be able to get the benefits for that position? That is the case of many of the employees in the Princes Town Regional Corporation and I guess most of the municipalities throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

I plead with the Government, fix your state authorities who are already vested with the power to fix salaries and terms and conditions, rather than to cure it with the Minister. Madam Speaker, that is not a good cure. If we continue on this path, these state entities will be rendered useless. Further, by allowing the Minister to do these things, there will be discrepancies in salaries to be received by mayors, councillors and aldermen alike. Councillors and aldermen only receive part-time stipends, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, and I can attest to this. The stipend, as you would have heard here today, you are not being—you are not paying NIS, you are not entitled to a gratuity. This is a political job so there is room for political discrimination when you exit the council, Madam Speaker.

And as the former AG, now the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, would have said, we would have endured 62 years, I believe he said, of old talk. But, Madam Speaker, what he failed to realize is the PNM Government was in power for most of those years so this could have been fixed. So, I say they are selling dreams.

Madam Speaker, councillors are known as full-time responders and as such, there is no justification why they must continue to receive a stipend. So, we are in agreement that they need a fixed salary, Madam Speaker. The reform to this Bill must take a bottom-up approach. You have to start with the workers not at the top. As under sections 68 and 69 for the proposed amendment under the Municipal Corporations Act, Madam Speaker, eight councillors would be chosen to head

committees under the new reform Act, so the stipend needs to be upgraded to a fixed salary to suit the positions.

Madam Speaker, another point of much concern is that the Minister with the responsibility for finance also now plays a role in determining the manner in which money is spent in the corporation under section 108. The Minister can determine projects. That leaves the door open for political discrimination or victimization. Madam Speaker, Moruga/Tableland is suffering PNM victimization currently. For example, I can foresee priority projects always in Port of Spain but never in Moruga/Tableland. The new section 33D, Madam Speaker, the creation of the executive council executes—excludes, forgive me, the voice of the minority, and this we cannot allow.

Madam Speaker, what is the purpose of the chain of command? Madam Speaker, who would the executive council be reporting to? Again, it would be the Minister of Finance, Madam Speaker. What we have in Trinidad and Tobago is a set of parallel agencies with similar objectives or mandates that, Madam Speaker, to paraphrase, you can call one for help and they say it is not me. And you can ask another and they will say, not me. Where is the complete differentiation of the separation of powers, Madam Speaker? This convoluted bureaucracy only extends the time that the resources take to reach the citizens. Madam Speaker, this Bill fails to address the issues of proportionality amongst the corporations. There is disparity in the allocations to the different corporations, boroughs, based on geographical location and population size. Can the Minister clarify what determines the amount allocated in various corporations? How does the revised procurement Act and Property Tax Act affect the corporations and the disbursement of funds from the Consolidated Fund, Madam Speaker? Will corporations be allowed to retain proceeds from disposing of property? Will corporations receive higher allocations

to execute their portfolios?

Now, the Minister is saying \$30million. Madam Speaker, that is not stated in the Act and that is one of the problems. Are considerations made for the maintenance work on anything, Madam Speaker? Because the allocation is in millions, Madam Speaker, it sounds good. But, Madam Speaker, the current situation in the Princes Town Regional Corporation for the grounds—for 56 recreational grounds that are vested in the Princes Town Regional Corporation, the yearly allocation is \$1 million. Madam Speaker, how does 10 councillors with 56 grounds share \$1 million? And I do not see that changing under this current Act. How is a corporation to repair a road or landslide that needs \$1.2 million, when the allocation is only \$4 million, as I said, for 10 electoral districts, Madam Speaker?

While the residents blame the corporations, as highlighted by the chairman, Madam Speaker, it is clear—it is now crystal clear that it is central government and the drafters of this Bill that had the opportunity to effect meaningful change but chose not to do so. But know these things have not been considered for reform. Madam Speaker, the Government continues to perform geographical discrimination. The corporations are under-resourced but, as I mentioned, Madam Speaker, the Bill does not fix that. According to Chairman Sammy of the Penal/Debe Regional Corporation, letters were written about the insufficient funding and resources to the Prime Minister and to the Minister of Finance. The Budget Division instead responded with instruction to use revenues accumulated by the corporation from market vending, et cetera. Madam Speaker, these fees can barely fix a box drain, far less maintain recreational grounds, buy fuel and roads.

Madam Speaker, this is to paint a picture of the current state of our municipal corporations. Madam Speaker, the Minister said \$30 million. In a newspaper article dated 6th of February, 2022, the Princes Town Regional

Corporation has estimated \$28.7 million needed for work on 29 landslips. Madam Speaker, and this is 29 of over 100 landslips plaguing that particular region. Why is money always the issue, Madam Speaker? The chairman has to plead with the Minister of Finance and I do not see that changing. Even with the establishment of the executive council, they still have to go to the Minister of Finance. So, they are saying that they are removing the bureaucracy, Madam Speaker, but that has only increased and now you will have to sing to the tune of the Minister of Finance and execute the project in the area that is highlighted by the Minister. There are no provisions for equity in population, geographic size and allocation of resources in each municipality. No equity in representation levels. The last time the law changed, we reduced the municipalities.

In 1992, there were 139 electoral districts in Trinidad. In 2016, this was reduced to 137 and in 2019, the report stated we were back at 139. But in the 1992 local government elections, Madam Speaker—and this is to paint the point of population increase—there were an electoral size of 774,233 voters. In 2016, the voting population was 1.06. Madam Speaker, and in the last local government elections, the voting population was 1,077,186. So, the voting population from 1992 and to now, 27 years later, has increased by approximately 300,000, Madam Speaker. But you know what? We have not changed the boundaries. We have not changed or made sort of improvement, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, what you see is that there is, again, geographical discrimination and disparity. That cannot be right.

For example, the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation. It means that a councillor represents four times the number of voters and therefore, the work load, than a councillor in Point Fortin, and this is across the board. This is something that is seen in the Princes Town Regional Corporation. For me, as a councillor, my

electorate would have been bigger than a councillor in Point Fortin, Madam Speaker. Equal voting powers, seats must be equally distributed and this is the international best practice of equality of representation. So, the existing system promotes inequality. We must address that in our way going forward.

On January 10, 2022, the *Daily Express* reports that 15 homes are on the verge of being cut off completely from society. Madam Speaker, this road was asked here today in one of the oral questions placed to the newly mint Minister for local government and his answer was, it would be tabled this year subject to funding. Madam Speaker, if we are here to discuss reform, that was not the suitable answer to give. Madam Speaker, but here we are today with promises, promises I hope the general public could see through. Why is lack of funding always the issue, Madam Speaker? But what is the Ministry of local government—well, the soon-to-be downsized Ministry, Madam Speaker. Our roads are in a state of disrepair constantly. Madam Speaker, these are all questions that need to be answered. What is the point of all this paper? What is the point of this debate when the actual operations of the corporations are not being taken into account? I have to repeat my regular adage, fail to plan and plan to fail.

Madam Speaker, I now turn to clause 10 of the Bill which seeks to impose property tax. The Opposition is vehemently—the Opposition vehemently disagrees with the implementation of any property tax at this juncture, Madam Speaker. We are objectively in the worst of times with the pandemic, inflation, high unemployment rates, high crime, a declining downstream, a non-existing tourism industry and a failing Government. Why does the PNM Government insist on having our citizens carry the burden at every point in time, Madam Speaker? The budget presented last year was a copy and paste of previous budgets, fixing nothing in the economy. We are surrounded by infrastructural disrepair in

Ms. Benjamin (cont'd)

buildings, opening buildings for politricks and not being—that is not being able—

Madam Speaker: Member, I want you to get back on track—

Ms. M. Benjamin: Sure, Madam.

Madam Speaker:—with what we are debating, please.

Ms. M. Benjamin: No problem, Madam Speaker. I will get back to the Bill. Madam Speaker, so why should persons pay property tax? Madam Speaker, how are we incentivizing the people to pay property tax when we have more potholes than roads? We have no water, dysfunctional street lights, broken barriers on the highway, overgrown bushes, a general lack of maintenance on anything yet we have to pay property tax, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, section 9A seeks to give certain powers to the Board of Inland Revenue. There is some significant discomfort as to why the Board of Inland Revenue is now being empowered to give confidential tax-paying information to the corporations, the former who we had entrusted because it was secure to collect our property tax. Let me know, Madam Speaker. We are not in support, Madam Speaker, of any property tax.

What are we doing here, Madam Speaker, putting burden on a citizen that is already frustrated? There seems to be a lack of logic and reasoning for these quick and poorly drafted Bills. Further, what are the consequences, Madam Speaker, if someone does not pay the property tax? This is something that the Minister needs to answer.

And I would like to close by asking the Minister several questions. Could the Minister explain the disparity in the roles and salaries between corporations, boroughs and cities, example, Port of Spain versus San Fernando? Madam Speaker, what process would the chairman take to fairly select eight councillors—eight or five as stated in the Bill for the positions on the Executive Council? What

is the guarantee that 8 per cent allocated to the corporations would be returned in full from the Consolidated Fund and in what time frame this should be established in fixed terms?

When the new procurement disposal system is established, who would the procurement officer be held accountable to, responding to, taking orders from? And as I asked in the beginning of my contribution, when a corporation disposes of any of its old vehicles who—when a regional corporation disposes of public property, old vehicles, for example, Madam Speaker, would funds go to the Consolidated Fund or to the municipal corporation that disposed of it?

Madam Speaker, I will also like to end with a plea to the Minister. Through his vast PR, I saw that the new Minister for Rural Development and Local Government recently discovered that Trinidad produces the finest cocoa in the world. Madam Speaker, I would like the Minister to visit the cocoa museum in Moruga—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. M. Benjamin:—and to see if we could get the exporting back of our cocoa to Italy and France. Madam Speaker, this will create jobs. This will stimulate my local economy and it will also boost our tourism sector. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

4.30 p.m.

The Minister of Youth Development and National Service (Hon. Foster Cummings): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to contribute to this debate, and to say that I want to commend those members of the committee who did yeoman service and produced this report for the consideration of the Parliament, and in true UNC style, I see that a Minority Report was submitted.

Because, as far as this Opposition is concerned, they will support nothing that they think will contribute towards meaningful development, and they continue in true form.

This, Madam Speaker, is a revolutionary change in local government, and will certainly lead to the improvement in the delivery of goods and services to the people at the local level. Because, Madam Speaker, when you consider local government and what are the issues that local government is supposed to treat with, then observing what has been happening over the last couple decades, we know that some reform is required. And what are some of those issues, some of those areas of responsibility, and it is noted in the report? The construction and maintenance of roads, local roads, orphan roads, agriculture roads and bridges. The construction and maintenance of minor drains and minor water courses, local health, food inspection, general sanitation, road and control, vector control, canine control, garbage collection and disposal, Madam Speaker. The development and maintenance of recreational grounds, parks and public spaces, development and maintenance of cemeteries and crematoriums and cremation sites, markets and abattoirs, disaster management, rebuilding inspectorate and municipal spatial planning, collection and disposal of faecal waste.

And, Madam Speaker, what we are attempting to do, of course, is to improve on these services, in addition to the ones I have listed before, the distribution of truck borne water, local and economic development, ensuring a clean environment within the municipality, the repairs and maintenance of government and government-assisted schools, and the promotion of local tourism, sports and culture. That is the expanded list that the new legislation will seek to address. But I want to spend a few minutes on an improvement that is intended to bring about greater efficiency at the local government level. And that is the establishment of an

executive council. This move, Madam Speaker, will bring to local government executive management and full-time officers at the level of the executive of the corporations. The work of councillors at that level is really a full-time assignment. When you look at the responsibilities I just listed out earlier, persons elected to perform those functions, they really are the first call from the citizens and the residents at the local level. When those matters listed require attention, it is the councillor that the people look to at the first call.

And I hear coming from the other side talks about equity. Now, I attended the consultation held at the Preysal Government School, the Preysal High School some years ago under the former Minister Franklin Khan, God rest his soul. And there were many current practitioners of local government from the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation present, and they made contributions. So whilst I hear talk about lack of consultation, I noticed practitioners present at that consultation, former practitioners and some present practitioners. And when I hear talk about equity I want to remind them that in the conduct of the business of that particular corporation, areas that they consider not to be supportive of their political party, are totally ignored.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Cummings: I want to remind them that the Point Lisas development which falls within that corporation absolutely no work has taken place there for decades by the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. So to come to talk about equity then you have to consider your own conduct where you have such responsibilities.

I see that my colleague from Couva South has found his voice in this term and I wish that he did during the period 2010 to 2015. You would think now that he could serve as the Minister of Local Government, listening to him. During that

time, I think he served as the Minister of nothing. But, Madam Speaker, it is an arrangement intended to improve on the services available at local government, as I said earlier on. The reform of the Municipal Corporations Act, which gives some additional responsibilities, but also which improves on what exists now. Bearing in mind, the successes we have had at the Tobago House of Assembly, this executive council is pretty much modelled after that Tobago arrangement. And what it does is that it gives specific responsibilities for particular areas, and each of those areas will be headed by a secretary. So it is a new organizational structure that would be established within the corporations. And that is at 33H and 35A. The divisions will be established under section 35A and will be subject to the approval of the Minister. And some of the—taking into account that you would have specific executive officers responsible for specific areas, you now have a situation of more accountability. You now have a situation of persons being able to reach out to the particular officer who is responsible, the secretary for “X” or the secretary for “Y”. Wherein the case as it is now, we do not have that arrangement.

Another feature of this legislation, Madam Speaker, is the improvement in the democratic process within the corporation. As it is now, if a mayor, for instance, demits office then the deputy mayor will step in and assume the position until the remainder of the term of the mayor who demitted office for one reason or the other. In this legislation the deputy mayor—I think it is at 17H—would act in the stead of the mayor who dies, or resigns, or is removed, or is disqualified until a new mayor is elected. So that person will just hold the office until an election of a new mayor takes place. This, Madam Speaker, is an improvement in the democratic process within the corporations. Another improvement that I want to point out is the ability of the corporation to have the power to employ staff, to set qualifications for post, to discipline or dismiss employees. We know all too well,

that there is a problem with performance at the local level.

Many of the corporations, when you observe the workers, you would see that many of them show up for a very short period of time during the day and still receive a full day's pay. It is a drain on the taxpayer, and the taxpayer gets very little in return. This legislation will bring about improved efficiency as a result of the corporation and the council having more say in terms of the employment of staff and the discipline of staff. Because many of the simple tasks that are supposed to be performed by local government at this point in time in terms of cutting of grass and cleaning of drains, I have seen a lot of that work being done by workers of the CEPEP Company Limited. So, I am sure that this will be a welcome improvement in terms of the efficiency and the way that work gets done at the corporation level, Madam Speaker.

At 33H, as I mentioned a little earlier, the corporation shall have the right to establish its organizational structure in accordance with the division's established under section 35A, and subject to the approval of the Minister. And, of course, Madam Speaker, that is of course a vast improvement. And then their pet topic, I think almost every speaker from the other side that spoke mentioned property tax, because somehow this issue has been politicized by the Opposition. It did not start now. It started, I think, about just over a decade ago, where they found that the term property tax somehow got some kind popular support in terms of opposition to this tax. And notwithstanding the understanding that this tax is critical to funding the upkeep of secondary roads and drains, recreational grounds, cemeteries, garbage collection. They understand, they must know that that is how these services are supposed to be funded. And notwithstanding that, because they feel it is a good soundbite they continue to talk about no property tax, at least not at this time. Well, you have been saying that for the last 10 years and more. And the

fact is that there are many citizens who in the quest to have better services provided at the local level are very happy to pay their property tax given the opportunity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Cummings: Madam Speaker, the inclusion of orphan roads for maintenance in this improved arrangement is one that will bring relief to a lot of residents, particularly in rural areas where in some cases the development may not have been organized as it should be, and that there are many roads, particularly in my constituency for instance, there are several roads in the rural areas that can be categorized as orphan roads, and you know I welcome this initiative to see that we can address some of these situations.

Some of the issues are quite familiar in terms of what are some of the problems that have been experienced over time at the local government level. Several speakers would have mentioned issues such as inadequate funding, the inadequacy of the current legislation and how the changes that are required to make sure that we improve on it, and the report points to that. The administrative structure, I mentioned that earlier; the unnecessary bureaucracy, sometimes to get simple things done at some of the divisions currently under the local government arrangement it is so much paperwork, it so much bureaucracy so that it is a matter of simplifying some of these issues. The lack of productivity that I just spoke of, and, of course, manipulation of systems by persons who have been in the administration for a very long time.

One of the improvements, I think, we need to take note of as well, is the application and approval of simple structures for construction. Madam Speaker, I can tell you that being a developer in my previous career, that at the corporation sometimes it takes a very long time to put some of these approvals through,

because they have to go from different departments to different departments. And improving the application process for these plans for simple structures such as residential structures will bring significant ease to the public in terms of their ability, particularly for first time home owners who would like to get about constructing a home for their family. A one-stop-shop that caters for these approvals, these simple structures is a welcome improvement to the legislation. And what it sets about to do here, is to decentralize some of the functions from central government to local government. So whereas in the past one would have all applications going first to the Town and Country Division and then coming down to the local government body for a series of approvals before a building permit could be issued, now those simple construction issues will be dealt with solely at the corporation level. And complex issues, of course, will continue to be dealt with by the Town and Country body at the central level.

Madam Speaker, I did mention before, and I want to point out in more detail that there were consultations which started back in 2015, led by former Minister Khan that took place in every corporation throughout Trinidad, and one was held in Tobago. I attended two of those sessions; one at Couva and one at Chaguanas, and in both cases there was such interest shown by the both in terms of attendance, but also in terms of participation, as members of the public approached the microphone and made contributions towards the development and improvement of our local government system. And if you listen to those opposite us you would get the impression that we are here at this juncture without any discussion or consultation with the public. I am told that at these sessions over 3,600 persons attended these consultations. I am also advised that over 300 questions and comments were recorded. And following that, even during the operations of the committee, six meetings held, several stakeholder presentations made to the

committee; 15 meetings and 66 stakeholders, Madam Speaker. So, I am lost to understand what additional consultation the UNC members are speaking about. It would seem that it is all intended to continue to obstruct the process. But on this occasion, for the benefit of Trinidad and Tobago, thank God this legislation does not require their support, Madam Speaker. We will continue with this legislation and we will pass it for the benefit of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Cummings: Madam Speaker, in order for these municipalities to function effectively and efficiently, it is the intention of this Government to modernize the local government framework, and we are committed to do so. We gave that commitment, somebody from the other side who reads the manifesto of the PNM more than us spoke about it. Their whole contribution was based on the PNM manifesto. We gave the commitment then, and in true PNM style led by a Prime Minister who means what he says, we are here to deliver to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Cummings: What this means is that the municipalities would be given the autonomy that they deserve, given certain levels of autonomy, and, Madam Speaker, given certain levels of executive authority to be able to manage their affairs and to be able to make decisions for the best interest of their burgesses, and, of course, in keeping with the model that we have seen the success that it has brought to the development of Tobago. Only yesterday I was in Tobago, and it was pleasure to meet with the officials of the THA, and to move to different areas looking at some of the development work in terms of the matters that fall under my portfolio. And in every area being met by a secretary for a particular division, and that person being able to demonstrate and to show how that model brought about a

particular level of autonomy and development to the people of Tobago. We intend to make sure that at the local government level in Trinidad that we have the necessary improvements, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, in addition to the current functions of these bodies, the Bill will facilitate local government bodies to be engaged in economic planning and research, the question of monitoring and evaluation of performance, creating and developing entrepreneurs, which is something that the Government, by policy, is very committed to doing; building relationships with civil society through the participation of citizens involved in their own development; and securing funding from various streams. The Bill speaks to the municipalities being able to raise funds in particular areas. There will be expansion in the following areas of responsibility: That is public health, the municipal police. And, Madam Speaker, even before this legislation, the Government has taken steps to expand the municipal police in most corporations, if not all, across the country, and you would have seen in recent times calls for recruitment of additional municipal police, so that the work of the municipal police in this area in these regional corporations will have the manpower in order to carry out their responsibilities.

I spoke before of the planning and building inspectorate and the improvement in that area. Disaster management, another critical area in local government, and some of the corporations performed that very admirably. Repairs and maintenance to public buildings. As you move about some of these local districts, you see a lot of state-owned property that require some additional attention. And if it falls upon the local bodies to execute those arrangements, because they are familiar with the buildings, because these buildings serve a purpose within the local geography, then we think it will improve the efficiency of the maintenance of these buildings. Of course, cemeteries and crematoriums and

other places that are used for cremation, that will also be improved.

Some of the additional areas as well, Madam Speaker, will include social welfare services, the management and repairs of community centres, which is a critical area. Many of these are community centres at the local level require some more attention, and it will fall to the regional corporations to look after those matters. Development of small contractors within the municipality. This trend of contractors from one area are dominating work in a particular municipality, this will treat with that as we seek to improve on entrepreneurship within the locale. Economic research and planning, local government development units, information communication technology to mention a few.

Madam Speaker, we are looking therefore at a question of greater autonomy and accountability at the local government level, and the modernization of the local government system as we know it. I think, Madam Speaker, that this will be a welcomed development in local government, and that our citizens are really going to be very happy to have these developments taking place, and certainly they will pay the UNC the attention they deserve for trying to obstruct this kind of development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Cummings: So it is a question, Madam Speaker, in closing, of more effective and efficient delivery of services, an improvement in the responsiveness of the local government bodies to the needs of the burgesses, and improved delivery in terms of development at the regional and local level, increased participation of the citizens in their own development, the improvement in monitoring and evaluation, and, of course, very importantly, increased economic development and sustainability of communities.

Madam Speaker, the PNM Government is determined to improve the service

delivery to all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. We are determined by policy that we have spoken to before today, to make sure that the decentralization that is required to take place to bring Government closer to the people, will come into place by this legislation, and I commend this legislation to all Members of the House for its support, and wish to express thanks to the members of the committee who served and were able to bring us to this point. And I thank you very much for the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Couva North.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Ravi Ratiram (*Couva North*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, as I join in this debate: Be it resolved that this House adopt the Report of the Joint Select Committee on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020, moved by the hon. Member for Arouca/Maloney. And I listened to the Government Members' contribution, it re-enforces in my mind, Madam Speaker, just as I am certain, it has cemented in the minds of the population of how disconnected this Government really is with the reality and hardship our citizens have to face on a daily basis, Madam Speaker.

5.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker, today we are discussing this report on the local government reform and I would like to just highlight a few areas of responsibility of the municipal corporation that we would be discussing here within this reform. According to the report, page 315 which has the Thirteenth Schedule, under the: "Areas of Responsibility of a Municipal Corporation", (a):

"Construction and maintenance of local roads, orphan roads and agricultural roads and bridges"

And, Madam Speaker, this is something that we will definitely welcome because when we look at the level of neglect and hardship that our citizens have faced for the last seven years under this administration, specifically in the constituency of Couva North, where my constituents had to face with the collapse of the Ragoonanan Road west bridge and I have written to the Ministers, both local government and Works and Transport, spoken to both of them, pleading with the repair of that bridge, it is definitely important that we move that responsibility away from the non-functional PNM Ministers and place it fully into the hands of local government at the CTTRC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker, item (b), under the areas of responsibility for municipal corporation speaks of:

“Construction and maintenance of minor drains and minor water courses.”

And I want to refer to a conversation that I would have had with the former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, right here in this House on October 14, 2021. And I quote from the *Hansard* of that Standing Finance Committee:

“I would like to refer the Minister to”—line Item—“001”—and that line Item was—“Water Management and Flood Control Programme.

Minister, this was allocated in 2021, 3 million but only 1.3million was utilized. And taking into consideration the quantity of flooding that has taken place especially within the constituency of Couva North which is more or less on the western coast where most of the watercourse from central Trinidad come down to Couva North, when it is exiting into the ocean. There is a significant amount of watercourse that was traditionally maintained by the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries previously,

that is not being currently maintained at this point in time. Can this Minister”—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. R. Ratiram:—“advise why it is”—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(1) please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, so again, hon. Member, I know you would have now commenced your discourse, tie it in quickly with regard to the report and the particular Bill, right.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your guidance and I am dealing with page 315 of the report under—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—the Thirteenth Schedule, section (b) which speaks of:

“Construction and maintenance of minor drains and minor water courses”

And I was making reference to the response that we would have gotten from Government Minister with respect to the maintenance of these watercourses before I was interrupted.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: The hon. former Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, Minister Clarence Rambharat, he responded to the question that I asked, and his response I would like to place on the record:

“Member, as I said when I dealt with”—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, sorry, go—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Standing Order 48(1), again.

Mr. Imbert: This is not in the report.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: His conversation with the former Minister is not in the

report and it does not arise from the report—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk and desk thumping*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: It does not arise from the report.

Mr. Young: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: The Deputy ruled on that already.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One, one second, one second, one second. All right, so hon. Member you are now going to give a response to the particular thing, and again I would not be able to give you authority in order to lay it on the records today, please. Right. Because again, it is not in the particular report, the response that you are going to refer to. So you cannot quote the Minister you are referring to. So proceed.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Well, guided accordingly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with the greatest of respect, and what I would like to place on the record is that this PNM administration has consistently neglected their responsibility to maintain our watercourses and that was highlighted in previous conversations right here in this House, but I will move on. I will move on.

As I move on to item (c) in the Thirteenth Schedule from the report which identified the area of responsibility of the municipal corporation:

“Local health, food inspection, general sanitization, rodent control, vector control, canine control.”

And I was so happy that this is also now moving away from the health on to the municipal corporation because in certain regional corporation where there is not a specific insect vector unit at that corporation, as it is in certain boroughs, in some of the certain corporations we have to depend on the Ministry of Health and I recall hearing the councillor for Aranguéz, Warner Village, Amit Sooknanan complaining in Aranguéz, where the constituency of the Minister of Health, the

kind of mosquito infestation and problems they have with health conditions—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(1). That is not in the report either. Totally irrelevant.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, based on your discourse I would like you to probably state the particular page so that I will be able to go along with you to be sure what you are quoting is in the particular report. If not, I will have to uphold the Standing Order.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Because remember we are dealing with the particular report that is before us, right? Proceed.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your intervention and guidance and I specifically made reference to the report, page 315, that I was making reference to under Thirteenth Schedule, Areas of Responsibility for a Municipal Corporation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: But, Member, keeping in mind, yes you are making reference to the page, but your follow-up comment and what you are bringing into the debate is not with regard to the particular report even though it may be mentioned there, but your discourse in terms of what you want to refer to. So please. And I have ruled so proceed, please.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As I move on with my contribution I would like to use this opportunity to respond to some of the contributions made by previous speakers and I would like to start with the hon.Member for Diego Martin North/East who seem to have a difficulty in understanding intellectual argument—

Hon. Members: [*Desk banging*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—from this side. And if it is the intellectual argument that is

being presented from on this side is a little too high for him and he falls short—

Hon. Members: [*Desk banging*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—in understanding, I will use this opportunity Mr. Deputy Speaker, to edify the hon.Member for Diego Martin North/East. Mr. Deputy Speaker, he questioned loudly, where the money is going to come from. And what we have—he also said, you getting 30-something million but you vex—in a very loud manner—“when they can have a dedicated revenue stream, but you vex”.

So the hon.Member for the San Fernando West, the newly appointed hon. Minister of local government intervened in his contribution, and I want to make reference to the interesting points raised by the hon.Member and the Minister. The Minister for San Fernando West suggested that the moneys were going to come from—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Chair, can I get some protection, please? I am being significantly disturbed from the other side.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And the honourable—and I know they may have some difficulty in understanding what I am saying—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk and shouting*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: But the hon. Member for local government—

Mr. Young: Yes, it is true. Agreed.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk and shouting*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence!

Mr. R. Ratiram: I do not know if they have a problem with the Member, you

know, but “oh gosh, leh we move on”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please Members.

Mr. R. Ratiram: “Leh” we move on please. He intervened and he suggested that they use property tax and he equate property tax to life, the life and the survival of the municipal corporation. He equated property tax to life. And—

Mr. Young: 55(1)(b). They have beaten—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Yeah.

Mr. Young:—property tax. Every speaker has referred to property tax and tedious repetition, not only of previous speakers but himself. 55(1)(b).

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members, Members. Again, Member proceed.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you very much, and as I move swiftly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, right, I ask the question, where it is during this pandemic and during this difficult time our citizens out there are going to find the moneys to pay these property tax? Because you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, another one out of the items that fall under the “Areas of Responsibility for a Municipal Corporation” is:

“Markets and abattoir”—item (g).

However, at the market right within the constituency of Chaguanas West, the Chaguanas Market, we have a situation where market vendors are owing rental fee up to the tune of \$1.4million. That is the reality of what our citizens, our market vendors, are facing with at this point in time.

You know, and it was interesting that the Member for San Fernando West asked, why should a market vendor go to line up by a cashier to pay moneys to the corporation, and he was talking about the alternative approach and so forth. But I really was hoping that the Minister was going to say how difficult it is for the market vendors out there. Because at this point in time as we make mention of

what is happening in those markets and in the Chaguanas Market, I want to use this opportunity today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to invite the hon. Member for San Fernando West, the hon. Minister of local government, to join with me in the constituency of Couva North as we tour the Chaguanas Market.

And it is important, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Government provide immediate funding to address the serious and lingering issues at the Chaguanas Market. At present these markets are funded by the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. Today I call on the Government to provide immediate funding to address a number of serious issues including potential health hazard at the Chaguanas Market that remain unresolved for the longest while.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to make reference to a recent newspaper article of Saturday March 19, 2022, bearing the caption:

“Vendors: Chaguanas Market in a mess”

Which highlights the plight of vendors at the Chaguanas Market who have been using portable unit for some time now as a result of failed sewer system at the market.

Officials at the Chaguanas Borough Corporation have stated that the malfunctioning sewer system which needs to be pumped several times per day, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and as a result the overworked pump has broken down with no funding available for their repairs. A resolution was passed by the corporation for the upgrade of the existing sewer infrastructure to be a chlorinated septic tank, but for this too the Chaguanas Borough Corporation awaits financial release from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government.

Similarly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the meat vendors at the market have also encountered their fair share of woes with all three meat chillers at that market being non-functional since last year October. Even the area where they sell meat

which was designed to be an air-condition space is now unsuitable since none of the five air-condition units are operational. This in turn has reduced the hours during which the sea food and meat can with be sold if the vendors are to avoid spoilage. So now the vendors have to cut back on their functioning and the hours of sale at the market because of the hardships that they are facing. For every hour that their produce spends outside of the basic required storage and safe condition the risk of a health hazard increases.

The officials at the Chaguanas Borough Corporation have empathized with the vendors, however their hands continue to be tied as the PSIP, the *Public Sector Investment Programme* funding which was allocated to accomplish all of these infrastructural maintenance and upgrades is yet to be released by the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government. All of these issues have been highlighted for many years and a tangible proof of the gross incompetence and mismanagement we face by this administration, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Further, it calls into question what can only be described as a deliberate political vindictiveness and neglect as the Chaguanas Market is in a UNC controlled constituency of Couva North. Today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, through you, I use this opportunity—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please.

Mr. R. Ratiram:—to call upon—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, just retract and say it differently please.

Mr. R. Ratiram: I retract, I withdraw and I move on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And you could say it differently.

Mr. R. Ratiram: I move on. And today, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I call upon the newly appointed hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local

Government to get working within 48 hours to make the necessary releases available in order to swiftly resolve these issues and provide the minimum acceptable condition for both vendors and the general public at the Chaguanas Market.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to move on to the contribution made by the hon. Member for Arouca/Maloney. And the Member for Arouca/Maloney in her presentation she spoke about the Bill focusing on the development and people empowerment. And I want to say to the hon. Member and to those on the other side, that people empowerment, in the eyes of a taxi driver it means, proper roads; so all their revenue does not have to go to buy shocks and front end when they ply their trade. People empowerment and the development of people empowerment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it involves cleaning watercourses, access roads, agricultural access roads and properly outfitting things like the praedial larceny squad. That is how we go about empowering our farmers. And when we speak about development and people empowerment it means making the resources available to our councillors and mayors so that they can effectively service their burgesses and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago and no longer be stifled as they have been stifled under this PNM administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move on to the contribution made by the hon. Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara—and I am just putting my notes back together here when the hon. Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara stated— Yes, the hon. Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara stated that Tobago has long reached where we are to be with local government. And also the hon. Member for La Horquetta/Talparo in his contribution also, he hailed the successes that we have

had with local government in Tobago. I want to give them both a round of applause, because the people of Tobago clearly understand where we need to be with respect to local government, and that is getting rid—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—of the PNM in the face of local government, because of the kind of neglect our citizens have to face for the longest while, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, in her contribution she spoke about the legacy that the people of her former seat—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—of her former seat lost—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again, proper pronouns, please, proper pronunciation—

Mr. R. Ratiram: Guided. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—titles of the particular individual.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is a lot of jargon that I am trying to put together here.-

Mr. Young: The man reading a speech.

Mr. R. Ratiram: But as I pull my notes together and the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, you know, in her contribution she stated, of the legacy that she left in her former seat. And I want to say to the hon. Member, Member, it is the legacy that you have left there, it is that legacy that has caused the burgesses in that local government seat to lose confidence in the PNM which is why when there was a by-election for your seat it went from the PNM to the UNC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: So do not come here to talk about the legacy in your seat when the People's National Movement lost it after it became vacant.

Mr. Young: Your legacy is what? Bringing in—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mr. Young: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: The hon.Member for Diego Martin North/East, he spoke about consultation from contributions made by my colleagues. And very loudly he shouted “lack of consultation, my foot”. Very disrespectful.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to go to our stakeholders’ consultation—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: One second, one second. Again, Members on the Government side, I would like to hear the Member’s discourse please. Proceed.

Mr. R. Ratiram: I would like to go to the stakeholder consultation and quote from page 231, with respect to consultation. And this is not me saying who is saying this. I am quoting from what, the PNM control; Port of Spain Corporation had to say on 231. And I quote:

“There is a greater need for consultation and recommendation with respect to Clause”—and the continue highlighting.

I continue again, moving on to the stakeholder consultation and in the report, page 119. Written comments from the Chairman of the Mayaro/Rio Claro Regional Corporation. And this is here in the report, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

“We are being asked to make contributions on the recommended changes to the bill that was debated previously.

The recommended changes to the Development Act, No 10 of 2014 Clause 3, and all the relevant sub sections identified, I have no objection to the recommended changes, but to include in a few areas.

1. Clause 3 (o) Section 34 A (1) Should include in consultation

with the recognized Trade union.”

How many trade unions were actually consulted in the process? Was any at all consulted in this process? So, the Chairman of the Mayaro/Rio Claro Corporation is sharing the same view of the Port of Spain Corporation and both corporations continue to call for further investigation.

I want to continue and move on to orphan roads, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as the report relates to orphan roads under Appendix V, Consolidated Version of the Miscellaneous Provision (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020. On page 261 there is a proposed definition of “orphan roads”. And that is:

““orphan roads” means all or part of a road or right of way that is private or unadopted, has not been classified in accordance with the Highways Act, and not maintained at the public expense.”

While the Bill proposed to absorb orphan roads under the various corporations the stakeholder’s comments have been asking for the necessary funding and resources to be provided to maintain these roads. And this here is from the key stakeholder’s submission, Port of Spain Corporation is asking for funding, Siparia Regional Corporation is asking—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes, Member.

Mr. R. Ratiram:—for funding. Point Fortin Borough Corporation—thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Point Fortin Borough Corporation is asking for additional funding, San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation, the Trinidad and Tobago Association of Local Government in page 2010 of the report all these organizations issues concerns of stakeholder, there will be need for much more funding. And this report in no way whatsoever addresses the main issue and the number one issue that has been facing local government since this PNM administration has come into office.

It is clear that local government has been treated like a bastard child and has been neglected for the longest while, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, with that being said I would call upon the hon. Prime Minister to call the date for the next local government election and let us bring about the reform by replacing the People's National Movement—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—in all 14 regional corporations. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Port of Spain South and you have 30 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Keith Scotland (*Port of Spain South*): Mr. Deputy Speaker, there goes the hon.Member who cried wolf. The hon.Member for Couva North states that he is happy with the fact that rodent control and insect spraying have been removed from the Ministry of Health and via the new Bill is now and will now be under the corporations. What is he saying? He is supporting the Bill and poor thing, the hon.Member does not know that he is support thing Bill.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland: This brings me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to my main point, because as I address the nation through you on this Motion, this most timeous Motion to adopt the report of the JSC on the provisions of this Local Government Reform Bill I wish to lament the consistent attempts by the Members of the Opposition to undermine anything that is in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It is a pattern. The hon.Member for St. Augustine stated that the Opposition is people centered. The hon. Member for Couva North said that this Government is

Mr. K. Scotland (cont'd)

disconnected. Were they disconnected and people centered when they did not support the amendment to the Bail Act? Were they people centered and connected when they did not support the anti-gang legislation that tries to put a lift on crime?

Mr. Lee: 48(1).

Mr. K. Scotland: Is the Opposition being people centered when they come now and do not support—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Again, Member let us stick close, very close to the Bill please and on the report.

5.30 p.m.

Mr. K. Scotland: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am going to stick very close. Is the Opposition being people-centred now, when they are not supporting this report on reform for local government? I say that all this talk about people-centred is poppycock. This report touches and concerns reform of local government, and the very contents of the report when you skim through the pages shows this it is in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Firstly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the broad consultation, the broad and extensive consultation with all the stakeholders that transpired before this report came, demonstrates that it encompasses all pertinent issues affecting local government and local government reform. The report recommends certain amendments to the Municipal Corporations Act, but in particular there are some sections that I would wish to address the nation, through you, about. The first is section 33A which will provide for the establishment of the municipal corporation council and an executive council, and 33B which amends the said Act and now prescribes roles and responsibilities for the municipal councils. These changes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, these changes mean the broadening of the process of democratization and increase in mass participation in the decision-making process of Government.

The report and the amendments suggest the inclusion of a new section, section 36 of the Municipal Corporations Act which mandates the corporation to have a staff consisting of chief officers in line with that that exists in Tobago. Now this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to my mind is essential for the efficient discharge of the function of the council in the near future. It serves a two-fold purpose. Firstly, it will strengthen the administrative capabilities and capacity of the council by improving their ability to deliver and supply goods and services. And secondly, by having a staff which is in line delineated and charged with a specific task, it will provide for the efficient discharge of the council's function and we will ensure the involvement of the citizenry in the decision-making process and in determining local government needs. It will be specific to the municipality.

The report recognizes that local government and its reform is a cornerstone of our democratic structure and is a cornerstone of our development as we seek to make Trinidad and Tobago a competitive nation, and as we seek to assuage certain fears and certain hardships that the people, the burgesses, day-to-day experience, Mr. Deputy Speaker. How long have we complained about red tape? How long have we complained about our councillors not being able to deliver goods and services in a timely manner? The report recognizes that local government reform is a necessary vehicle to provide and to produce intelligent and responsible citizenship in Trinidad and Tobago, where people are allowed to take charge in their individual communities and chart a course in these communities for themselves.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I have asked time and time again, what is objectionable about those goals? I will now try to explain, as I understand it, certain aspects of this Bill and the legal framework within which it operates. Sections 78 to 81 of the proposed amendment to the property tax legislation is a

Mr. K. Scotland (cont'd)

very significant section, and those sections are very significant and it makes sense. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you will be well aware those sections now empower each municipality when they collect their residential property taxes to keep them and put it in the municipal fund. How does that work for a community? Well, it means that the collection of revenue in these communities will now be filtered back into those communities for the improvement. So all the talk about potholes will now mean that you do not have to go to central government for funding because you will have your own funds. All the talk about clearing of waterways, all the talk about the markets and the vendors not having infrastructure, this will go—this tax, the collection of this tax will go a long way in alleviating those concerns. That is a brilliant move because the moneys that are collected in the community will stay in the community for the benefit of the community and there will be less reliance on the central government to do things within the community. It means that there will be delivery in a more timely fashion, and there will be delivery for things that are needed in these communities.

Why is there this objection to the property tax and its usage? The benefits will then be for all communities in Trinidad and Tobago. This reform is not limited to municipalities that are under PNM control. It is for the entire country. The benefits will redound to all, and I think that the hon. Members on the other side have a duty, a sworn duty under their Constitution, the oath that they took, to act in the interest of the persons who they represent. And by not supporting this Motion, it is a dereliction of that duty and from that duty. I keep reminding the people of Trinidad and Tobago there is a lot of talk on the side of the hon. Members on the other side about support for grassroots. Who would be the persons most affected by this reform? Not the grassroots in Chaguanas; the grassroots in Arima; the grassroots in Siparia; in San Fernando; Penal/Debe; Port of Spain; Sangre Grande?

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And this Government is showing that it is taking actions that will benefit the grassroots in Trinidad and Tobago in all the corporations. Put your vote where your mouth is. The Opposition respectfully says that it cares, but their actions say something different.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in pursuing these reforms, the tenets of this report give the grassroots population in Trinidad and Tobago a greater sense of involvement but it is not limited to one sector. It applies across the board to all sectors in the community. It is now demonstrated again by looking at section 35, the amendment to section 35 of the Municipal Corporations Act, which gives the corporation and which will give the corporation powers and responsibility to manage its affairs on a day-to-day basis with more autonomy. What does that mean? It means, therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that it is not every time and every decision that is being taken in the corporations that would need the ratification of the central government. It will redound to the benefit of the citizenry because there will be swifter action and that would lead to more efficiency in these corporations. The legal ramifications continue. The legislative framework—Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look, I think there are about nine main pieces of legislation that are touched by this reform. If you read this report, the legislative framework attempts to reduce the amount of red tape that cripples local government operations at this time. Every single gripe, every grouse contained in the Minority Report and parroted by the oral submissions by the hon. Members of the other side, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is encompassed, is dealt with when you look at the reform that the legislation brings.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the submission by the hon. Member for St. Augustine and also the hon. Member for Couva South that workers' rights are being eroded, has no basis in reality. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to turn your attention and the country's attention, these are very—it is like trying to monger fear in the working

class when there is no need to, when the actual facts debunk that fear. So it was bandied about that, one, the rights are being eroded and, two, there will be mass retrenchment. Mr. Deputy Speaker, retrenchment is not something that one wakes up a morning and says one will implement, you know. Retrenchment starts with, one, there is a “surplusage” of labour for a particular task; two, this “surplusage” leads to redundancy because you may have more than one person to do the same task; and three, thereafter due to the “surplusage” you may have retrenchment and you use the process or you use the model of life or last in, first out. But there is more protection for the workers than was stated and quite frankly omitted by the Members of the other side.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to turn to sections 34A and F of the report, and the suggestions to the new Bill. This clause inserts:

“...section 34A which provides for...pension rights and schemes for its employees and a new section 34F which would provide for...grievance procedures”—did I say grievance procedures?—“which are set out in the Twelfth Schedule.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the uninitiated, you know what a grievance procedure is? A grievance procedure means that you cannot be capricious and deal with me without following a procedure. The Member for Couva South should know that. The hon. Member for Couva South should know that a grievance procedure which is enshrined—it is enshrined in the document—it means then that this process has a sibling relative “to the principles and practices of good industrial relations” are stated in section 10(3)(b) of the Industrial Relations Act. Why instil fear, hon. Members, when there is no need to do same, when the very legislation, the very report encompasses not just pensionable rights but a grievance procedure? But it goes further.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you read it, I think it is section 22 of the Municipal Corporations Act, a new section now says that the members—and this is the legislative framework—the supervisors or the chief officers will be responsible for the selection, the hiring of staff, based on the needs and efficiency of the organization. And it is those persons, those supervisors, those chief officers, who will be responsible for the discipline of the employees if and when it becomes necessary. It means then that someone cannot be working here, and then you go before a service commission there, and your supervisor who know nothing about your function somewhere else comes and disciplines you. It means that the person who is being disciplined, it will happen with the supervisor who knows well, you are late for work five days now out of 10 days. What say you? This makes for an efficient running of the corporations in this new incarnation with the rights of the workers being soundly protected and enshrined in the legislation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I now turn to another aspect of the legislative framework, and this deals with section 69 of the Municipal Corporations Act and the amendment. This amendment gives standing committees in the council greater autonomy and oversight relative to the day-to-day operations of these bodies. What that means, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that when the corporations exist in this new incarnation there will be direct oversight of the day-to-day operations, and there will be no disconnect between the oversight and the operations. Does that not redound to a more efficient local government? Mr. Deputy Speaker, the increase in the term of office of the councillors and aldermen from three to four years is something that must not go unnoticed, and if you would allow me to develop a nuanced submission. You would have heard Members on the both sides say a lot of persons who sit in this august House now, this august body now, have come or had their genesis in local government. If you now increase the time that—so it is like a

gestation period where you get your feet wet into politics, let us say that, and you get into service of the people, when you increase that period, that period where you are allowed from your embryonic stage to get experience from the three years to four years, it means that if persons—and you have heard it, persons move from there to here, it means that we will be getting a better calibre of personnel because they will have more experience. Not just three but four years and the extra year makes a difference. Even here a month makes a difference. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am now reading without notes. It makes a difference.

So that amendment, that increase from the three years to the four years, if we accept what has been said by the plethora of speakers, means that you will be getting persons who are more trained, who are more seasoned in both parts. If they stay in local government they will be more seasoned, if they come here they will come more prepared. That is a plus. I have not heard any criticism of it. Also, the revolutionizing of the tenure of the councils and aldermen is very important because what it does is it gives security of tenure both in salary and permanency. It means that there can be no excuses. The theorist will tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that job security and tenure is a very powerful motivating factor for human beings.

This change, simple as it may seem, has far-reaching psychological and industrial social physiological implications, and I am surprised that the hon. Member for Couva South, as someone who came out of the belly of labour, did not use that and did not say that to the country, that this is a laudable amendment which gives security of tenure and a firm salary—not a stipend—to persons now in the corporations. Why is there such silence on the other side?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland: Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we look at sections 32 and 33, you see that these sections taken together will lead on the improvement of delivery of

projects and services without the delays that are associated now with the local government having to go cap in hand to central government. They tried to belittle the hon. Minister of Finance when he said it will be an average of \$30 million. For a local government body \$30 million is a lot of money. It may be \$30 million more than what they have now. Why not support this? Why not work with the Government to ensure the benefits for the people of Trinidad and Tobago instead of a Minority Report?

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, having sat on the committee, the JSC itself, when you look at the hon. Members of the other side, the hon. Member for St. Augustine, MP Khadijah Ameen; the hon Member I think, for Chaguanas East, Vandana Mohit; the hon. Member, Sen. Anil Roberts; so you have soft and you have loud.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. K. Scotland: “What more dey want?”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland: What more could we have provided for them? If you didn't want to hear, “you woulda hear” this time. What more could they have wanted? They had a voice, the voice of the voices. So therefore, therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to come with this Minority Report and they want to say mamaguy; that is mamaguy and smoke screen because they know—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland:—that there is no substance in that Minority Report. It is hollow. I will not say shallow. That is not parliamentary, but it is hollow. Therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Motion—[*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please.

Mr. K. Scotland:—cries out for the support of all right-thinking Members of this

House. The hon. Leader of the House by presenting this Motion seeks to put more power and responsibility in the palm of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. This is a Motion that supports the notion of government of the people, by the people, for the people, by placing more authority and responsibility in the hands of the people, and I support it and the people of Port of Spain South support it. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Princes Town, and Member, you have 30 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to be able to contribute to the Motion before the House to adopt the Joint Select Committee Report on local government reform. Mr. Deputy Speaker, right off the bat I would like to address a few issues contained in the report that Members have refrained from going into those areas, but to say that the Member for Port of Spain South gave us a long song and dance but it would have been better if the Member had contributed significantly to the Joint Select Committee when he had the opportunity to do so. Because when one peruses the verbatim notes and the attendance record there is a very poor showing by the Member for Port of Spain South. So one would have hoped that the Member would have used his time wisely in the committee to make those recommendations that he provided to the House. And therefore, when the Member speaks about shallow clearly—

Mr. Scotland: [*Inaudible*]—Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Ms. Ameen: What Standing Order?

Mr. Young: 48(1).

Mr. Scotland: 48—you did not hear 48(1)? “Yuh deaf?”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please, address the Chair.

Hon. Members: “Oooh.” [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Address—Member, address the Chair.

Mr. Scotland: Sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: 48(1), proceed.

Mr. Scotland:—I would ask respectfully that the hon. Member cites the record of attendance if he is to make these allegations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland: I say no more.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, overruled. Proceed.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, a lesson for my friend would be if he were to read the report, he would see that all the documentation is properly provided in the report, but I would move on, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I would like you to turn your attention, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to page 82 of the Joint Select Committee Report and one of the areas that is specifically dealt with in the report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as it relates to local government reform, has to do with the relationship between WASA and the 14 municipal corporations.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, page 82 of the report speaks to two recommendations coming from WASA in terms of the relationship, and for most local government practitioners, and for those of us who have been around local government before, we would know that at the meetings of the regional corporations there is something called the coordinating committee and that essentially brings all the stakeholders to the table to determine the challenges and the way forward in terms of how you are able to address problems being affected by burgesses, whether it is in the public utilities sector or whether it is any other sector. And page 82 of the report under

recommendations coming from WASA in terms of the relationship for the provision of water to the regional corporations as it relates to truck borne water, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which is an essential service of these local government regional corporations, the two recommendations were, one, “Technical, financial and economic assessment to be done by WASA”. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I looked at the actual recommendations and the reports later down from the committee there was very little that was said about this recommendation in particular coming from WASA on page 82.

Then when you look at another recommendation being:

“Funding can be provided under Community Water Improvement Programme (CWIP) of Public Sector Investment Programme...”

Again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there has been very little support coming from this CWIP, the *Public Sector Investment Programme* (PSIP) as it relates to providing additional resources to the regional corporations. That would actually inform this local government reform, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This coming directly from page 82 of the verbatim notes of that meeting on that date where WASA provided these recommendations have not really borne any fruit, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in terms of being addressed in the reform itself. And one would have hoped that an important agency like WASA working with the 14 regional corporations would have had a greater say and a greater importance and role.

Because essentially, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I can recall in my own constituency through the Princes Town Regional Corporation, just in 2018, we had weeks on end where Moruga/Tableland, Princes Town, Naparima, Mayaro, did not have a pipe borne supply of water for weeks and months and, therefore, residents in those areas, constituents, communities, were totally dependent on truck borne water. And the challenge then at that time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was getting the

resources coming out of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government to the regional corporations to provide a sense of relief to constituents and burgesses, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So again, one would have thought that this would have been a critical area seeing that this issue of water and truck borne water affects a lot of these rural communities that we on this side of the House represent.

There has been very little coming forward in terms of what we have heard from Members opposite on this particular issue. It is very evident and clear on pages 81 and 82 of the report. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you go on to page 83 it also has where WASA sought to clarify and demarcate their role in terms of working alongside the regional corporations, and there is where the blurring of the lines takes place. One would have hoped that legislating their role through these coordinating committees would have been of great assistance in the local government reform process.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the other issue that I would like to turn to has to do with the issue of the disaster management units, and again it is contained in the report. But when we speak about these disaster management units, Mr. Deputy Speaker, coming from local government I am sure you will appreciate the challenges of many of these disaster management units.

6.00 p.m.

And just a few months ago, in my own constituency where the Piparo mud volcano resides, we had the challenge of having first responders go into those communities in Piparo to deal with effects of the Piparo mud volcano. And when first contacted through the Ministry of local government, we were told that the Disaster Management Unit in the Princes Town Regional Corporation, they will be the first responders. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in many instances across these 14

regional corporations, there are about two or three persons in that Disaster Management Unit and those persons are not properly equipped, they do not possess the expertise, the technical wherewithal in order to deal with some of these challenges that the Disaster Management Unit is trusted to deal with.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one would have hoped that the fleshing out of a proper disaster management unit would have been part of the reform. And I know my colleagues will be quick to point me to pages 262 and 263 of the report to say, “Well, the policy and so on will be determined now by the regional corporations themselves.” But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we still do not have full autonomy in terms of these reports, in terms of these organizational structures because the Minister of Finance still has that role and function in terms of authorizing these organizational structures, the reviews, et cetera. And therefore, what we are seeing—and the Member for St. Augustine made this point when she said it is almost a stymying of the process. So, you are moving the bureaucracy from one area through the Ministry of local government and essentially transferring it now to the Minister of Finance.

Another area I would like to turn to, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has to do with the issue of borrowings and when you look at comparative jurisdictions that have gone through local government reform—and one of my colleagues dealt specifically with South Africa, a Commonwealth country, The issue of borrowings, as contained in the local government reform and the Joint Select Committee Report, again, municipal corporations will determine their projects, will determine programmes, policies, et cetera. But when it comes to borrowings, again, it will be beholden to the Minister of Finance to make those decisions, to give that approval and that authorization. And again, if the Minister of Finance wants to play politics, what you will see happening is that a lot of these programmes, these policies, et

cetera, will be stymied, will be shut down, because you have the political arm of government essentially shutting down a lot of these projects coming from regional corporations that may not be supportive or belong to the party that the Minister of Finance belongs to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, also, with respect to the local government reform and the JSC Report, I would like to raise an issue that I have raised in the past two to three budgets and since 2017, I have been raising the issue of the Princes Town Regional Corporation and this falls under the contribution that would have made by the Princes Town Regional Corporation contained in this Joint Select Committee Report. We cannot seriously speak about local government reform by empowering municipal corporations, all 14 of them, giving them greater autonomy through several Acts contained in the reform process without providing them with the proper equipment and the proper tools to get the job done. And what has been happening at the Princes Town Regional Corporation is, for the past four to five years, they have been occupying a building that has failed OSHA compliance, not once, not twice, but on three occasions.

I had written personally. I have also had the Chairman of the regional corporation write to then Minister of local government to have this situation rectified but we cannot speak about improving the quality of life of burgesses when we cannot provide a proper conducive environment—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—a safe environment for employees across the 14 municipal corporations, including that of the Princes Town Regional Corporation. This has fallen on deaf ears. We have had absolutely no response coming from then Minister of Local Government and Rural Development. And I am hoping that this is an issue that the new Minister, the Member for San Fernando West, will pick up.

Because if we are seriously talking about at local government reform and one wants to champion municipal police being increased to 100 across every corporation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what you have happening at the Princes Town Regional Corporation—and I know that this is happening across many of the other regional corporations—is that essentially a lot of these municipal offices have been squatting. They have been squatting in other public buildings, they do not have proper facilities, et cetera, and therefore, essentially, this is really putting the cart before the horse in many aspects as it relates to the local government reform and the measures contained in this Joint Select Committee Report.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the other issue is—my colleague for Couva South dealt with the issue of protection of workers with respect to their pensions and the Member dealt comprehensively with this.

I would like to turn to one last issue, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and that has to do with the solid waste management that falls under these regional corporations and it is contained in the Joint Select Committee Report. Again, when you look at the contribution of WASA to the Joint Select Committee Report, it pretty much is very silent in terms of what their recommendations and what that symbiotic synergy that is expected to occur between these 14 municipal corporations and state agencies like WASA. WASA, right now, is up in air. We have heard very little as it relates to the Cabinet sub-committee report and the recommendations coming and how it will impact on local government reform because we do have the issue of solid waste management.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I turn your attention on December 13, 2012, Cabinet by Minute No. 3295 agreed to the establishment of an inter-ministerial committee for a period of nine months to oversee the consultancy that would have engaged to develop a solid waste management strategic plan for Trinidad and Tobago, and to

function as a counterpart team to work alongside the IDB. When confronted with this project, there was very little reporting in terms of what has occurred in terms of this solid waste management strategic plan. That would have informed a lot of the work that the regional corporations would be engaged in and would assist in terms of bringing about a measure of relief so that the reform will actually impact on the lives of the everyday man, woman and child in this country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this SWMSP is being carried out in—well, it was supposed to be carried out in collaboration with the Inter-American Development Bank, the IDB, under the water and sanitation initiative. The IDB agreed to assist the Government in—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, excuse, what page are you are on, please?

Mr. B. Padarath: I am actually, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I am focusing on the solid waste management strategic plan as it relates to the contribution of WASA as contained on pages 82 and 83 of the JSC Report in relation to the reform.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Mr. Deputy Speaker, on June 20, 2013, Cabinet by Minute No. 1724 agreed to approve the national integrated solid water waste management policy for Trinidad and Tobago. The point is—why I went into this is to say that there must have been continuum in government, in terms of a Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration would have dealt comprehensively through then Minister Ganga Singh in the Ministry of water resources to have dealt with the issue of solid waste management strategic planning and in terms of dealing with that in relation to the 14 municipal corporations across Trinidad.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, those issues have tremendous impact on the people of Trinidad and Tobago, especially those of us, as I have indicated, who represent constituencies that are rural constituencies that depend on issues like the water

trucking supply of water from regional corporations to their homes, also the issue of solid waste management. Just again, in my own constituency of Princes Town, Moruga/Tableland as well I know, and Naparima, had the challenge of solid waste management contracts not being sorted between the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government at that time and we saw piles and piles of garbage being piled up across these constituencies for weeks before any measure of relief could have been brought to these burgesses and constituents.

When the Member for St. Augustine spoke, and all of my other colleagues who I support, with respect to the issues that they have raised in the Minority Report, the real reason that we cannot lend our support today to this legislation has to do with the fact that it does not address the issues that really impact on the everyday lives of the men, women and children in our constituencies.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: It does not impact on the issue of proper garbage collection. It does not impact on the issue of proper truck borne water to constituencies like ours. This really is a piecemeal approach. It is a plaster on a sore.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would have participated in the consultation exercise then at that time being promoted by the former Minister and Senator, now deceased, Sen. Franklin Khan, and those consultations were not really meaningful consultations. They took two and three questions from members of the audience and persons who tried to air their grievances, they were told, "Well, you could complain to the Ministry or you could go to the regional corporation." That is not how we know stakeholder consultation to be. So unless this has an impact on the lives of the everyday man, woman and child, in the real sense of the word of consultation and proper governance through local government reform, until then, we will not be able to lend our support. When you can tell us how you will affect

and bring change to truck borne water, pipe borne water, garbage waste and collection, those are the things that are important to the people of Trinidad and Tobago and this legislation does not address those issues.

All this seeks to do is change one title to another. All it seeks to do is shift power from the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to the Minister of Finance. So, it is really a juggling act, it is really musical chairs when you look at the legislation and the JSC Report and it does not give effect to a lot of the recommendations by the stakeholders, namely WASA, and the regional corporations that this will affect.

With those words, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for San Fernando East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Brian Manning): Mr. Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to speak today on this landmark Bill which we will expect to dramatically improve the lives of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. This Bill will improve the ability of the regional corporations to deliver goods and services to the people of this country. This landmark Bill seeks to remove red tape and bureaucracy which have hampered various local government bodies for a very long time and have prevented the more effective and efficient delivery of services, which is exactly why those on the other side seek to prevent this reform from taking place. That has been their goal from the very beginning.

There are several tasks currently being managed by central government which could be more effectively handled by local government bodies, especially social services and community development. Mr. Deputy Speaker, local government reform has been a key policy of the People's National Movement for a

very long time for as far back as 2002. Let me give you a brief history. The last time there was any meaningful local government reform in Trinidad and Tobago was in 1987 under the NAR Government. That resulted in the Municipal Corporations Act No. 21—

Mr. Lee: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 55(1)(b). It is tedious repetition. I mean, everybody had gone through the history for the entire day.

Hon. B. Manning: I am pretty sure they did not say that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled.

Hon. B. Manning: The Municipal Corporations Act— You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they do not like to be reminded of exactly how long this has been going on because they want to continue with the cry of more and more consultation. We on this side believe and we know that there has been more than enough consultation on this Bill and now it is the time to act.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: The Municipal Corporations Act No. 21 of 1990 was proclaimed in 1991. This Act replaced the former county council system with 14 municipal corporations, two city corporations, three borough corporations and nine regional corporations. Under several Patrick Manning administrations, there were attempts at reform. There were extensive consultations in all municipalities and several policy documents were developed, all requiring consultation. Let me remind you of those documents. There was a Green Paper in 2004, a Draft White Paper in 2006, a Green Paper on roles and responsibilities in 2008, a Draft White Paper in 2009. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this all culminated into the Local Government Bill of 2009, which was piloted by the then Minister of Local Government, Mrs. Hazel Manning.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: [*Inaudible*]

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Member: On that note, on that note.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday the 25th of—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis:—to Friday the 25th of March at 1.30 p.m. That day is Private Members; Day so I would invite my colleague to let us know what we will be doing on that day, please.

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In response to the Leader of Government Business, we will be doing Motion No. 5 on today's Order Paper by the Member for Naparima.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Member for?

Mr. Lee: Naparima.

Mr. Indarsingh: Your very distinguished colleague.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You are ready, Members? Before putting the question on the Motion for the Adjournment, hon. Members, there is one matter that qualifies to be raised on the Motion for the Adjournment of the House. I will now call on Member for St. Augustine and you have 10 minutes.

Oropune Gardens Housing Development (Inadequate Maintenance Services)

Ms. Khadijah Ameen (St. Augustine): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I want to take this method in the Parliament of the Motion on the

Adjournment to raise a matter in the constituency of St. Augustine and particularly, the area of Oropune Gardens. The Motion is entitled: the failure of the Government to provide adequate maintenance services, namely garbage collection, lighting in carparks, regular water supply, repairs to apartments, road repair and the cutting of overgrown grass for residents of the Oropune Gardens Housing Development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I filed this Motion some time ago, it took some time to qualify, and I did so after more than a year as the elected representative for St. Augustine and the difficulty in raising these matters that affect the Oropune Gardens and the frustration the residents face. While the residents representatives, organization residents groups and NGOs and village councils would have also been doing their part, prior to me becoming their MP as well as joining me in terms of representing the community, the difficulty in terms of getting feedback and results that they would have experienced, I also experienced it. And I would have, as Member of Parliament, sent numerous letters to the Minister of Housing and Urban Development who always graciously replied that my concerns were noted and that the letter was sent to the Managing Director of the HDC. However, after that, we had no feedback.

I was tempted to withdraw this Motion because while waiting for it to qualify, I finally had confirmation from the HDC that they would accede to my request for a meeting to discuss the issues. And a couple of Fridays ago, on Friday the 11th of March, I was able to meet with the HDC and I want to thank the Managing Director for facilitating that meeting. But following that meeting, I became even more concerned because there are still a number of issues. I felt it was still important to bring the Motion here for the attention of the Parliament and for the attention of the Minister. And today, the first meeting of Parliament that has a new Minister of Housing and Urban Development and, of course, all of the issues

of HDC would be brought to the attention of the new Minister as that person establishes themselves in the position, I thought it would be very apt to bring it to the fore in the hope that the matters could be addressed because many of these issues do not only affect Oropune Gardens or St. Augustine constituency but HDC developments in other parts of the country.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

So, with respect to Oropune, I want to raise the matter of the outstanding ownership titles and deeds for residents who were relocated from the construction of the old airport, Oropune Village to Oropune Gardens, and that was the start of the Oropune Gardens. And the fact that although the work would have been started some time ago, they have not received their titles. The issue of—

Madam Speaker: Member.

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes?

Madam Speaker: I am just guiding you in terms of what the text of your Motion is. Okay?

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: And therefore, I am just guiding you with respect to Standing Order 48(1) and ask you to come within the text of your Motion. It is very specific.

Ms. K. Ameen: Thank you. The issue of rehabilitation works on the apartment buildings within Oropune, I know that there is work going on other HDC developments with regard to a programme that would have come to Oropune. The HDC was unable to give specifics with regard to the work to be done in Oropune Gardens. And I am very concerned because when I go there and you visit residents, for instance, on the third floor and so on, even the handrails are falling apart. It is so dangerous that if a person holds—

Mr. Al-Rawi: I rise on Standing Order 48(1), please.

Madam Speaker: Well, the Motion does include repairs to apartments so I allow it based on the Motion says “repairs to apartments”.

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes. Thank you. So, even to access the apartments to go up the steps and so on, it is now dangerous because some of those rails are disconnected because of rust and so on. There are a number of residents who have had hinges falling off to the extent where they cannot open windows and they have been waiting for months and, in some cases, years for these repairs to be done. A comprehensive analysis of what is required has to be done and hopefully, the Minister could give some positive feedback as when this could be programmed in the HDC’s repair and maintenance schedule.

I also wanted to raise the issue of the repairs to the roads and the cutting of the recreation spaces. I want to say that we have a councillor for that area, Councillor Richard Rampersad, and he has been graciously taking resources that are allocated to other areas to try to assist Oropune Gardens. So, the one road to access Oropune Gardens, Oropune Boulevard, was in such a terrible condition and HDC is yet to respond to our request to repair that road and other roads. And the councillor was able to get some leftover funding and so on from the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation and programme some sectional paving or patching to the bad sections of the road, but that still does not address the underlying problem of the need for a maintenance programme for the roads within the Oropune area. The Oropune Gardens is located in a flood-prone area and it does require special maintenance to ensure that the banks of the river and the floodgates, and so on, are in good conditions and therefore, the roads are susceptible, they often become damaged because the soil could be very waterlogged. So, we do need a regular programme to attend to the roads and the road conditions in that area.

The HDC also has open spaces that were designated or are designated for recreation spaces for the construction of a primary school, for the construction of a commercial centre which is important to any development, but those spaces have not been developed and they have become overgrown—

Madam Speaker: Member, again, you know, please be guided by what you asked here, please.

Ms. K. Ameen: Yes. I was mentioning that those open spaces have become overgrown and because of the lack of maintenance, sometimes the grass gets very tall, there is a danger for residents, in terms of security, where there have been persons who have been robbed and so on because criminals hide in the bushes and jump out at them, especially late at night. But you also have the issue of the rats and so on in the community, the public health aspect. Because those areas are poorly maintained, those overgrown areas are poorly maintained, we also have dumping, unauthorized dumping, and I mentioned here garbage collection and I want to tie in the both. Because the irregular attendance to the household garbage and what you call bulk waste is causing the creation of mini dumps and those areas that were designated for different things that have now become overgrown, they have become mini dumps and I know it is a challenge. And I am willing to work with the authorities to ensure that the residents are sensitized, that they behave responsibly.

And while I know that there is a responsibility on the citizens with regard to the disposal of their garbage, when you do not have the services to remove the bulk waste and so on, the creation of mini dumps will take place. As Member of Parliament, I have partnered with NGOs in the community to beautify spaces as they are cleaned. So, we did have a couple of those mini dumps that were cleared with trucks and a backhoe, with the assistance of the councillor for the area and

we have had plants, ornamental as well as fruit trees, donated from various sources and together with some young people in the area, we will be beautifying those areas. So, I—

Madam Speaker: Member, your time has now spent.

Ms. K. Ameen: Thank you very much for the opportunity.

Madam Speaker: Minister of Rural Development and Local Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Madam Speaker. It gives me pleasure to respond to this Motion. It is actually one which both the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, and the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government could answer because the topic set out in the Motion is certainly one that covers two spheres. So, permit me to explain as follows.

The learned Member for St. Augustine has just made the case for local government reform quite oddly and has in fact proved why the very Bill that we have just adjourned ought to be supported by the Opposition and I will say why in answering this Motion. The Motion asked that and it is set this way: the failure of the Government to provide adequate maintenance services, garbage collection, lighting in carparks, regular water supply, repairs to apartments, road repairs, cutting of overgrown grass for residents of Oropune Gardens Housing Development.

Madam Speaker, the root of all of these issues is to be found in who is vested with what responsibility. In the structure that applies at present, Oropune Gardens, as it relates to its grass cutting, as it relates to its garbage collection, as it relates to the structure of managing the ingress and egress from the particular place, those things are dealt with road servicing by the HDC, at present, but really

ought to be dealt with by local government. And, Madam Speaker, it is so interesting that the Member who raised this Motion is the Member for St. Augustine because the regional corporation that has the responsibility is in fact the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation.

And one of the things that the Government has been very careful to do is to design the plan to get out of whose responsibility is it. Is it Peter paying for Paul because Paul paying for Peter because you do not know which is which? In this particular structure, we have to ensure that the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation takes over the responsibility for garbage collection, for road repair, for cutting of grass, et cetera, so that both St. Augustine, and the Minister of Housing and Urban Development, and the Minister of Rural Development, and both entities sitting opposite each other in this House can ensure that people get the services that they want.

6.30 p.m.

Because people really do not care whether it is rural government who did not do the job, in this case Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation doing some, or HDC who did not do the job, what is required is that there is a solution. So let me say that the solution is as follows: the solution is ensuring that the vesting of the asset is done properly.

And today we spoke about orphan roads in an earlier matter, which I would not go into, but I would just say, Madam Speaker, that we are at the point of identifying in the Housing Development Corporation now, all assets that are to be vested in their appropriate cases. I can tell you that the Managing Director of the HDC, the outgoing Minister of Housing and Urban Development, the new Minister of Housing and Urban Development, attorneys-at-law acting for the HDC, have scrubbed the list of sites to be vested and how they are to be vested.

And as we move to local government reform I have already instructed, as Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, for an asset schedule and vesting schedule. Because the last time that the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government did that was in the 1990s, believe it or not.

Now I can say, by way of some measure, I am very pleased that the Member for St. Augustine acknowledged that the Managing Director of the HDC replied to deal with the issues of the residents, because that is first and foremost. But I can tell you, with respect to garbage collection, that the council, that is the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Council, agreed to facilitate three days scavenging services. They paid for it. The corporation, despite being in difficult circumstances for its moneys, contracted a company by the name of Sat Sais Company Limited to operate compactor services on Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays; that the corporation assisted with the provision of backhoes and with trucks to facilitate cleanup of dump sites, as St. Augustine mentioned. Of course, informal dump sites occur if you do not have the services done. So the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation has leaned in to provide services which HDC cannot provide in its current circumstance and we are sorting out the titling to know who does what.

With respect to road repair, I can tell you, Madam Speaker, that along Oropune Boulevard, First Avenue, Second Avenue and corner Oropune Boulevard and Fifth Street, in the 2020/2021, that the road rehabilitation exercise was awarded to Ramkissoon Construction Limited at a value of approximately \$220,000 and that at least some repair to that road and some relief is brought to the residents.

And lastly, I can say with respect to the cutting of overgrown grass, I wish to again congratulate the corporation for ensuring that on the request of the councillor for the electoral district of St. Augustine South, Piarco/St. Helena, that with the

approval of the council, the corporation did in fact utilize its resources to cut and clean many of the open spaces.

So, in summary, Madam Speaker, I will say there is relief at hand, number one, under the restructuring exercise of the HDC, which is to be split into three separate components and which will result in the division of assets across the HDC, without any injury to the HDC, its persons, et cetera. It will allow for the efficient rollout of resources, because it can be capitalized in a different way. In other words then, they get better money resource easier. And number two, if our dear friends opposite, the Member for St. Augustine included, would simply agree to local government reform in the terms of what we are asking for, so that the services set out in the legislation, in the proposed Schedule 13, can be delivered, so that it matters not which corporation we are talking about. If the Opposition would now agree that we have a perfect example in this Motion on the Adjournment to agree to get local government reform in gear, because this is how we will bring relief. Stop playing with the lives of people and making convenient—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—advocacy on people's suffering when you have an opportunity to fix it once and for all. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.36p.m.