

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Friday, May 27, 2022*

The House met at 1.30 p.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, who has requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Member seeks is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Audited Financial Statements of the Deposit Insurance Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2021. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
To be referred to the Public Accounts [Enterprises] Committee
2. Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation (Vesting) (Amendment to the First Schedule) Order, 2022. [*The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]

Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation (Vesting) (Amendment to the First Schedule) (Amendment) Order, 2022. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

URGENT QUESTIONS**Coast Guard Vessels
(Repair Works to)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of National Security: Will the Minister inform this House on the status of the two

UNREVISED

Coast Guard Vessels TTCG 41 and TTCG 42 given recent reports that they both suffered serious damages and are to be sent for urgent repair works overseas?

Madam Speaker: The Minister of National Security.

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It has been brought to my attention that one of the aforementioned vessels is now—is in need of some attention, and it is for that reason not immediately in service. The other is functioning as it is expected to in the service of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Given recent reports that the coast guard officers and members have been threatened by their superiors with non-renewal of contracts in connection with disclosing the status of the two coast guard vessels, can the Minister confirm or deny these claims which are now circulated in the public domain?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima, that question does not arise as a supplemental question in accordance with the Standing Orders.

Mr. Charles: Given problems in the public domain about the operations of the Coast Guard, the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard, is the Minister satisfied that it is properly managed at this time?

Madam Speaker: Member for Naparima, that question does not qualify as a supplemental question under the relevant Standing Order.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you, Madam Speaker. There is one question for oral response, and we will be answering that question. There are two questions for written response, and we will answer those questions. Thank you.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Regional Health Authority (Nursing Staff for)

180. Dr. Lackram Bodoë (*Fyzabad*) asked the hon. Minister of Health

With regard to nursing staff for each of the four (4) Regional Health Authorities in Trinidad, will the Minister provide the following information as at March 31, 2022:

- (a) a breakdown by category of the number of nursing staff positions on the establishment;
- (b) the number of positions in each category currently filled; and
- (c) the deployment of those employed by health facility.

Answer lodged in Parliament Library

Tocilizumab Drug at Public Health Facilities (Details of)

181. Dr. Lackram Bodoë asked the hon. Minister of Health

With regard to the use of the drug, Tocilizumab for COVID-19 patients at public health facilities during the period March 1, 2020 to March 31, 2022, will the Minister indicate:

- (a) the number of patients for whom Tocilizumab was prescribed as part of their treatment regime;
- (b) the number of patients who received Tocilizumab as part of their treatment regime, listed by COVID-19 facility; and
- (c) the total sum of money spent on the procurement of Tocilizumab.

Vide end of sitting for written answer.

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

UNREVISED

185. Dr. Lackram Bodoë (*Fyzabad*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Will the Minister indicate when the Mon Desir-Delhi Road, from Seeram Junction to Sparrow Junction, will be resurfaced?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan):

Thank you, Madam Speaker. A conditional survey is done by the Ministry of Works and Transport every three years on all roads under its purview. The last survey was conducted in 2021. The section of the Mon Desir-Delhi Road from Seeram Junction to Sparrow Junction is deemed to be in a fair condition and, as such, does not require full resurfacing at this time. There are some localized defects and WASA issues that are being attended to. The routine patching undertaken by the Highways Division will be supplemented by contractual spot patching works scheduled for July 2022. I thank you.

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

Dr. Bodoë: Thank you Minister for that response, and you mentioned the survey being conducted, but in view of the fact that construction traffic is taking place on that particular road, will there be any higher priority to resurfacing?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Through you, Madam Speaker. The Mon Desir interchange is about 70 per cent completed, and this will assist with the localized traffic issues in the area. After that is completed and routine spot patching and so is completed, if the road is deemed for resurfacing then the Ministry will then revisit its position at this point in time.

Dr. Bodoë: Thank you, Minister. As you mentioned the Mon Desir interchange 70 per cent completed, any idea of the time frame for full completion?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, as indicated, the Government has given a timeline as to the last quarter of calendar year 2022, to have that highway

completed the Mon Desir interchange is included in that timeline.

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

**Children of Trinidad and Tobago
(Government's Failure to Protect)**

Madam Speaker: Member, you are reminded you have 45 minutes full time.

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you Madam Speaker. I beg to move the following motion standing in my name:

Whereas there has been an overwhelming number of reports of children being abused during the current Government's administration;

And whereas children have the right to grow up in a safe, supportive environment devoid of abuse, exploitation, harassment, and neglect;

And whereas the State has a duty of care to protect all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago especially the children to which their policies have not been effective on safety, security, health and education;

And whereas several State agencies have indicated that there is a work overload within the system to particularly address matters affecting children:

Be it resolved that this House call on the Government to implement effective data driven policies, take all urgent steps to protect the children of this nation immediately and reprimand this Government for its failure to effectively protect and support our nation's children.

Madam Speaker, it pains me to bring this Motion to the Parliament against a backdrop and as a result of the discovery of massive amounts of physical, sexual and psychological abuse of our nation's children.

Madam Speaker, this Motion is not about me. This Motion is not about the Member for Siparia. This Motion is not about civil society. This is about every child in this country who depends on the protection of the State. The Motion is

about every child who should be able to enjoy a safe environment devoid of abuse, devoid of exploitation, devoid of harassment and, most importantly, devoid of neglect. This is about every child that remains in a broken system, scarred and scared, Madam Speaker.

This Motion before the House is like no other Motion that we have done before. It deals with an issue that is near and dear to each—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: I just want to remind all Members that we have to be mindful of our volumes. There is a Standing Order against running commentary while a Member is speaking. Please continue.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. This Motion before the House is like no other Motion that has come before. It deals with an issue that is near and dear to each and everyone of us, regardless to whether you are a biological parent or not. Therefore, as parliamentarians and legislators, today's debate grips the attention of a very traumatized and angry nation seeking answers, but more so, an angry and traumatized nation seeking solutions.

This debate requires us, as elected representatives of the people, to desist from personal attacks, from bacchanal and hysteria. It requires us to desist from attempting to score cheap political points at the expense of the innocence of our children. Rather, it falls upon us to have a greater degree of seriousness. It falls upon us to have a greater degree of sensitivity to identify the public issues and advance meaningful solutions that would have an immediate and long-term impact on our nation's children.

Madam Speaker, after seven years of being told by Members opposite that we are in charge and the Opposition has to deal with it, today is judgment day for them. They have spent seven years reminding the country that they are in charge.

The arbiters are not the Opposition. The arbiters are the children who have been abused, who have been raped, who have been murdered and who have been exploited.

Madam Speaker, it is to those children that Members of the Government must say what you have done, and what you will do. That is what today is about. Today, we in the Opposition, we pledge our continued commitment to being the advocates for children's rights. We give our commitment to work across the aisle with the Government as we call on them today to provide real, tangible solutions, data-driven solutions that would save the innocence of our children and restore our nation's faith in the institutions that are overworked, under-resourced and simply crying out for help.

Madam Speaker, this is the Government's opportunity to tell the nation what needs to be done, and we in the Opposition, we give the assurance that we will continue to be part of the solution, but the political will must come from you the Government. You must demonstrate, not by word, but by deed, the political will to address the critical issue of rape, abuse and exploitation, especially at state-funded institutions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, it is often said to whom much is given, much is expected. The Government has been given a mandate, but you have failed to meet the expectations of the population to protect the interest and welfare of our children. Therefore, the arbiters, who are the children, and I am almost certain that when they do their evaluation, as they have done, they would find that this Government is wanting on judgment day.

Today is the Government's day to repent, amend your wicked ways.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: We ask that you do not punish the children, that you lift them, that you provide for them and you protect them.

Madam Speaker, to address the problem one must first recognize that there is a problem. This Government refuses to accept responsibility for the breakdown of our institutions entrusted to deal with children's matters. This Motion reprimands the Government for its failure to effectively protect and support our nation's children. The most critical element to the protection and support of our children is the Children's Authority. For several years as the Opposition shadow for children's affairs, together with my colleagues, we have been raising in this House the plight of the Children's Authority.

Madam Speaker, I refer you to Standing Finance Committee on June 7th, 2021. The Trinidad *Newsday* carried a headline:

Webster-Roy—meaning the hon. Minister for Gender and Child Development, the Member for Tobago East—and the headline read:

“Webster-Roy: Children's Authority not neglected”

In the article it said:

“I reject the notion that the Children's Authority has been understaffed and under-resourced”—put forward by the Member for Princes Town, so said Minister Ayanna Webster-Roy.

Madam Speaker, earlier I said, the first thing you have to do to address a problem is to accept that there is a problem. The Minister appeared to be more interested in political expediency. The Minister appeared to be more interested in looking good, and the Minister was more interested in saving face. But you know, a former Prime Minister in this House used to remind us—and that is former Prime Minister Patrick Manning. Mr. Manning used to always say facts are stubborn things. But,

let us take a look at the allocations for the Children's Authority during the period 2016 to today.

Madam Speaker, you would recall that in 2016, the Government's first budget, they budgeted zero, zero, for an important institution like the Children's Authority. The Government of Trinidad and Tobago in 2016 budgeted zero.

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, 53(e).

Hon. Member: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Members. Member for Laventille West, please. Minister of Finance, Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, the volume is a little too loud. The mask may cloud clarity but it increases the mutter. Please continue.

Mr. Young: Sorry, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. In 2016, the Government budgeted zero for the Children's Authority, and this can be found on page 425 under the budget book *Estimates of Recurrent Expenditure*. Months later, after almost halting the operations of the Children's Authority, they got \$30 million. This clearly tells us that the children are not a priority for this Government. It was an afterthought. It was as though the supplementation was an afterthought, similar to the appointment of the Minister for gender and child affairs.

Madam Speaker, you would recall when the Cabinet was sworn in, in 2015, the media went and they asked the hon. Prime Minister: "Why did you not appoint the Member for Tobago East? Is there a ministerial portfolio?" Days later, the Prime Minister responded and he said it was an oversight, it was a mistake, it was an omission. But clearly, it told you that this was an administration that did not

have children as a focus and at the front of their minds and operations as a government.

Madam Speaker, in 2017 in the supplementation, once again the Children's Authority was under-budgeted. They had to come back for an additional \$1.7 million in the mid-year review. In 2018, they broke even with \$55 million. But in 2019 once more the Children's Authority was under-budgeted, and then they came back for \$6 million more, getting progressively worse and worse and worse.

By 2020 again the Children's Authority was under-budgeted by \$4.6 million. Does this sound like a government who cares about children? In 2021, the numbers jumped with respect to how much they under-budgeted the Children's Authority by. They were now asking for \$18.96 million more in 2021.

When asked—and I remember this specifically—when asked, the Minister, the Member for Tobago East said, this allocation, 70 per cent of it, would be used to hire staff at the Children's Authority. Madam Speaker, when I prodded further, and I asked about the category of staff, it was discovered that this was not for—to hire tea ladies, janitors or even administrative staff. After six years of being in Government, they were now looking to bring in specialized child psychologists and paediatric specialists. Therefore who sat on their hands and did nothing for six years to get the Children's Authority the staffing needed to help save the lives and innocence of our children?

Madam Speaker, it does not get better. When you speak of neglect, this is criminal negligence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: The Motion speaks about neglect, and this is criminal negligence. In 2022, just a few days ago, the Minister came for \$23 million for the Children's Authority. Many of us would have seen yesterday's Trinidad *Guardian*,

the front page, and the front page had the Director of the Children's Authority saying, "Finances hampering process to purge the system". Madam Speaker, does this sound like a government dealing with the problem? It more sounds like a government contributing to the problem.

Madam Speaker, how does this Government, and we must ask ourselves this, how does this Government reconcile what they have said and what they have actually done? To starve the Children's Authority of much needed funding is also a form of abuse. Instead of standing in defence of children, their inaction has signalled to perpetrators of abuse that the Children's Authority is a toothless bulldog, poorly equipped to detect and treat with the sexual and physical deviance endured by our nation's children.

Therefore, as the Motion says, the Government has failed in its duty to care and protect, especially the children, when as recent as yesterday a joint select committee of this Parliament is told by the Acting Director of the Children's Authority, Sharon Morris-Cummings, that the allocation of \$88 million received last year was deemed insufficient to attend to all the objectives of the Authority. We must ask ourselves, what are the objectives of the Authority? It is to create a safe environment for children. It is to protect them from abuse. It is to rehabilitate and give them a better quality of life.

So when we see that the Children's Authority says that they are asking for additional allocation, and they are not receiving it, as a responsible Parliament we have to ask, who is responsible for funding the Children's Authority? Is it not the Government? Is the Minister not in consultation with the Children's Authority to find out what is needed? Who does the Children's Authority fall under in terms of the Schedule? The line Minister will be the Prime Minister. Who is responsible for data-driven policies? Clearly, I have outlined that the Government's priority is not

the Children's Authority. Their priority is Soca on the Seas, paintings, Benz, while children fall to the mercy of those who are supposed to seek their interest.

Madam Speaker, in this House for years I have stood on becoming a Member of Parliament, and I have been raising the issue of the Child Protection Unit. First we had Minister Dillon who spent three years—and it is on the *Hansard* of our Parliament, but it has also been reported on in the newspapers and by several news outlets and news agencies. When I asked the hon. Member then, the Member who would have been the Member for Point Fortin, the Minister of National Security, about the Child Protection Unit, for three years the Minister gave us a song and dance, and could not tell us whether or not they had a full complement of officers at the Child Protection Unit. The Child Protection Unit is supposed to work in tandem with the Children's Authority.

1.55 p.m.

Madam Speaker, I have had members of the Child Protection Unit come to my constituency office, because they know I raise children's issues in the Parliament, telling me that they are severely under-staffed, they are overworked and the system is failing our nation's children. Madam Speaker, that is not Fantasy Island. That is the reality of the island of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, on May 9th, 2016, the media carried a headline that said "Padarath: Empower Child Protection Unit". This was May 9th 2016. The Member for Point Fortin, then as he was, deflected, could not say how many officers, whether or not they had adequate resources to work in tandem with the Children's Authority. We are almost seven years later and we still do not have those answers, Madam Speaker. Instead, yesterday's Trinidad *Guardian* gave us

a headline that says:

The abusers of children in children homes many of them are still there. And where did we get that information from? We got that information from officers of the TTPS appearing before that Joint Select Committee.

So therefore, Madam Speaker, is it that the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing? In local parlance we often say, “mouth open and story jump out.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And that is exactly what occurred at the Joint Select Committee of the Parliament yesterday. For three years when we raised these matters they could not give us a straight answer about the number of officers, whether it was properly staffed. The Child Protection Unit officers come into my constituency office begging to me to raise this matter of being under-resourced as is contained in the Motion that I have brought before the Parliament today. Therefore, when the Motion speaks about a work-overload within the system, this is exactly what I am speaking about in relation to the Child Protection Unit. Therefore, Madam Speaker, it clearly demonstrates how the Government has neglected their duty of care to children through the collapse of state agencies. And I have shown that with the Children’s Authority, and I have shown that with the Child Protection Unit.

Madam Speaker, I alluded a little while ago to the front page of yesterday’s *Guardian*, May 26th, where the headline:

“Abusers still in homes.”

But just a few days prior, Minister Ayana Webster-Roy on *Morning Edition*, May 18th 2022, was quoted as saying the following, and I quote:

I am sure that at no time the Children's Authority would have known of any child being in imminent danger and leaving that child in that situation.

Madam Speaker, I will repeat that. The Minister said that:

I am sure that at no time the Children's Authority would have known of any child being in imminent danger and leaving that child in that situation.

But then yesterday we saw the headline that says:

“Abusers are still in the home.”

Is it that the Minister does not know what is happening at the Children's Authority?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: What does the Minister have to say about that today? The article says that the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service told the Joint Select Committee that alleged abusers from the Justice Judith Jones report are still at the homes. Is it that the Minister continues to live in denial? Is it that the Minister is just simply incompetent? Is it that the Minister does not know what to do after seven years? Which one is it? Or is it all of the above?

Madam Speaker, when the Minister could not provide any coherent answers in that interview, this is what the Minister had to say next, and I quote:

If that particular report would have been made available to the various

Ministries that would have been responsible for gender and child affairs over the years, but made available to the public, then we would have been able to act and to ensure that we put measures in place to improve the childcare and protection system.

Madam Speaker, in a feeble and weak attempt of deflection, the Minister blamed the Government's incompetence for seven years on the Sabga report. All the Member had to do was go to the Leader of Government Business to know that it was in the public.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You see, Madam Speaker, I told you facts are stubborn things. And I want to share with you what the Member for Arouca/Maloney had to say on November 19th 2002. Because, Madam Speaker, we are not only dealing with the neglect of this Government as contained in the report, but this is a pattern, it is the modus operandi of this PNM administration. And this is what the Member for Arouca/Maloney had to say on the *Hansard* on November 19th 2002. The Member said:

“...let me make the point that in relation to the issue that was raised by Sen. Prof. Ramesh Deosaran regarding the report in relation to the foster homes and that issue of abuse, between the period 1991—1995, there were some attempts...to try to put administrative arrangements in place in order to train people in the proper care of children.”

But, Madam Speaker, the Member for Arouca/Maloney in 2002 did not stop there. The Member went on to say, in fact:

“...that particular Sabga report was used by the Ministry of Social Development to examine all the issues as they related to the care of children. The issues that were raised in the report were very revealing in circumstances where our society had depended on a number of foster homes to ensure care for our young children and for children who had suffered abandonment by their families. That report did, in fact, inform quite a number of policies that were developed during that period, especially as it related to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.”

Madam Speaker, I want to repeat that last line. The Member for Arouca/Maloney is on the *Hansard* of the Parliament in 2002 dealing with the Sabga report—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—and the utter hypocrisy, and using this for political expediency to peddle their incompetence and deflect from their incompetence with respect to the Judith Jones report, they jumped to the Sabga report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: But Mr. Manning used to tell us facts are stubborn things. And you cannot change—as much as you would try to rewrite the history of Trinidad and Tobago, you cannot rewrite the *Hansard* of the Parliament.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And this is what the Member for Arouca/Maloney had to say.

“...quite a number of policies that were developed during” their “period, especially as” it “related to the” UN “Convention on the Rights of the Child”

—was done.

Madam Speaker, as the young people would say, “Arouca/Maloney dais yuh? Buh a-a.” Madam Speaker, if we were to take the PNM’s logic that the UNC did nothing and did not send this to the police, the question is, did the Member for Arouca/Maloney in 2002 when she spoke have any concern that she forwarded it to the police at that time?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young: This is not a Motion about the Member for Arouca/Maloney.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Young: Hush!

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Young: 48(1).

Hon. Member: Right, say that.

Mr. Young: I said it.

Mr. Lee: And sit down.

Mr. Young: I will sit when I am ready to sit.

Madam Speaker: All right. So, Members, I ask us all for some temperance having regard to the fact of what we are debating and having regard to the fact to the audience that we have today. I take the opportunity to recognize the students of the St. Gabriel’s RC School.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Okay. All right. So Member for Princes Town, I rise on this to just guide. I understand the context with which you introduced the report, but we are not dealing with the report, based on what your Motion is. All right? I overrule the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Motion deals specifically with the neglect, the dereliction of duty of the Government. And I am showing that this Government has a history of that, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, the question remains: Did they sit on their hands on the report where the Member for Arouca/Maloney raised these concerns? But, Madam Speaker, would you be surprised to know that the same—

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*] not in the report.

Mr. B. Padarath: Sure. Madam Speaker, the public may not be surprised to know that those who sit opposite in the Government today were members of the Government in 2002. The Member for Arouca/Maloney, the Member for Diego Martin North/East, and the Member for Diego Martin West, they all sat in an administration, and I dealt earlier with the Children's Authority as is contained in the Motion in terms of the collapse institutions.

Madam Speaker, this is not the first time the Children's Authority has collapsed under a PNM administration. I want to remind this country, Madam Speaker, between 2002 to 2010, while the Children's Authority was on the statute

books of Trinidad and Tobago the Member for Arouca/Maloney, the Member for Diego Martin North/East and the Member for Diego Martin West did nothing, said nothing, sat on their hands and put their fingers on their lips when a Manning PNM administration did nothing to operationalize the Children's Authority, to give teeth to legislative framework that would have protected our children.

You see, Madam Speaker, when the UNC administration passed the Children's Authority Bill in 1991, the Children (Amdt.) Bill in 1999, the Adoption of Children Bill, 1999, the Miscellaneous Provision Bill, 1999, the Children's Community Residences, Fosters Home and Nurseries Bill, 1999. All of this, Madam Speaker, emanated from that Sabga report. And therefore, Madam Speaker, it is very clear, it is very clear to all and sundry, that we acted and we acted in the interest of the children of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: What did you do the between 2002 to 2010 to give teeth to operationalize that legislation? So do not come here and cry crocodile tears and try to deflect from your own incompetence, because the arbiters are the children who have been raped, who have been murdered, who have been exploited, who do not want to hear your excuses, but they want to hear what you will do and what you have done.

Madam Speaker, today I want to shout out the *Trinidad Express*, because if there is anyone who does not have the moral authority to speak on children's rights is those who sat in a Government for almost 10 years and remained silent while the Children's Authority was not operationalized. Madam Speaker, history has a way

of sometimes repeating itself, and that is exactly what we are seeing happening with the Children's Authority today. Madam Speaker, time and time again, from 2015 to where we are today, the Opposition has provided recommendations. We did not just moan and gripe about the challenges. We have been advancing solutions, giving recommendations, and when you look at the recommendations of the Justice Judith Jones report a lot of what is contained in the Justice Judith Jones report are things that we have been saying for quite a while. And today I challenge Members opposite that when the Members speak to say whether or not you have implemented these low hanging fruits.

Because, five months have passed since you sat on the report and did nothing. You have announced that a task force will be set up which would be given a six-week period. But that is not to implement the recommendations but rather to put forward a work plan and a work schedule. Today I ask you, and I challenge you, to stand in the Parliament and tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago, tell the children of Trinidad and Tobago, which of these recommendations you have actually implemented, because a lot of these low hanging fruits are that you could be doing or could have already done to assist the plight of those children who are scarred and scared because of the amount of abuse they have endured.

Madam Speaker, when we told them about the children's ombudsman, that has fallen on deaf ears. Today, it is contained in the Justice Judith Jones report. When we told them about the children's registry, and the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West and the Member for Tobago East, two years ago, they told us about the national identification programme for children. They told us that they

were evaluating tenders. Up to now, two years later absolutely no word on what has become about that announcement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Government governs by announcement and no follow-up. But then we ask ourselves, who the victims of the announcements without the follow-ups and without the follow through? And it is the children of our country, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, when we told them about staffing and resourcing the authority, the Member for East, just like the Member for Tobago West who told us they could get almond milk and yogurt in Tobago when there were no groceries on the shelves in Tobago, the Member for Tobago East says there is no problem with the Children's Authority. The Director of the Children's Authority is now telling us this, and we do not have the resources to deal with the problem and the children are still being abused, because they are still being subjected to those abusers in the homes.

But the Member for Tobago East will tell us, no, she rejects that notion. Madam Speaker, when we told them about a licensing regime for the homes, and, Madam Speaker, the licensing regime is actually contained in legislation. It is the law of the land. Seven years. You may say, well why you did not do it when you were there? You told the country, you are in charge and we will deal with it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Why have seven years passed and it is on our statute books, but you are doing nothing? You brought legislation for all manner of things, but to protect our children you have done nothing with respect to the licensing of homes,

and 46 per cent of children homes in this country remain unlicensed.

Madam Speaker, two years ago when we were dealing with the Children's Authority with respect to the supplementation, we asked the hon. Member for Tobago East about these persons that would be hired at the Children's Authority. I asked what sort of due diligence would be done and the hon. Member danced, deflected, from answering that question. But today in the Justice Judith Jones report it says that a greater degree of due diligence must be looked at with respect to hiring caretakers and specialized staff in these children's homes. They are now talking about subjecting them to drug testing and psychometric evaluations. Madam Speaker, it does not take a rocket scientist to figure out that if you are putting persons to look after children you have to make sure that they have the requisite background in order to provide the best care for our nation's children.

Madam Speaker, in the Justice Judith Jones' report it speaks about:

“The Children's Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act, remains ineffective until the mandatory licensing provision of sections 3 (1) and (2), and 17 have been proclaimed...”

Could this Government tell us why, for seven years, has this legislation not been proclaimed after you have been telling us you have been doing all this work with the Children's Authority, with all of this work with respect to community residences? Why is it after seven years you have failed to proclaim this legislation that would ensure that these homes have to fit a criteria in order to receive funding from the State and receive a licence to operate a children's home? Whose responsibility is that to proclaim legislation? It is the Government's responsibility.

And, once more, through this Motion, we can see that they have failed the children of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, in the Justice Judith Jones report, it also speaks about the childcare system is poorly structured, inadequately monitored, inconsistently regulated. Additionally the lack of accountability promotes an environment for abuse and absconding. We have seen children being taken out of these community residences and homes, and being taken to the homes of staff members of the Children's Authority who are responsible for their well-being. But we do not know what they are being subjected to, because they are not supposed to be taken out of the community residences and homes and be taken to anyone's personal residence. But that is what is happening under the Member for Tobago East, the Minister for gender and child affairs.

Madam Speaker, the report also tells us the child support centres must operate within the confines of the law, and therefore the report and investigators have found that these child support centres are operating outside the confines of the law, Madam Speaker. And therefore, if the hon. Member for Tobago East and these Government Ministers are serious about the protection of our children, these are low hanging fruits, these are things that you can address and deal with right away, but instead you continue to drag your feet and you demonstrate no political will to treat with these problems. Madam Speaker, this ties in with respect to duty of care of the State. And we ask, why are Members mortally afraid of dealing with these issues of paedophiles on a separate sex offenders registry when I called for

this since 2015? I have been calling for this. When we say utilize the schools, Madam Speaker, make the sex offenders registry public, years later, when I first called for that in 2015, years later we got an amendment to make it public.

Again, Madam Speaker, putting the cart before the horse, and in local parlance as we often say, the right hand does not know what the left hand is doing, and this is another clear demonstration of that, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have demonstrated here that the Government does not and has not implemented effective policies in many areas. But, I want to turn to the issue of health care, because it is an area that is dealt with in the Motion. Madam Speaker, the Couva children's hospital, it was the brainchild of the Member for Siparia, and the reason for creating a Couva children's hospital is that there were a number of children with life-threatening conditions in this country who could not afford going abroad to receive these surgeries. Madam Speaker, the reason for establishing the hospital was so that we can have these specialized surgeries be done right here in Trinidad and we would not have to send the children abroad. We would be able to utilize it for children within our region in the Caribbean. But, Madam Speaker, because of spite and malice they kept that hospital closed. The Member for St. Joseph often stands up and says they opened the hospital and closed the hospital on the same day. Furthest thing from the truth. We commissioned the hospital and there is a fundamental difference with the view of bringing in those doctors from Malaysia and other parts of Asia to provide those specialized surgeries for children so that they would not have to go abroad. Madam Speaker, we have gone back to the days of that.

Madam Speaker: So, I have allowed you some leeway, but even though your Motion speaks to safety, security, health and education, okay, it is not a separate issue. It is tied back to the initial premise about abuse of the children, with children in an abusive environment. It is not health in general. Okay, so I am not going to allow you to go down that way unless you tie what you want to say about health care to the abuse of children.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the fact that these children are devoid of receiving health care from the State, that in itself is abuse. That in itself is neglect as contained in the Motion, Madam Speaker. And that is how I tie this in. Government has refused, Madam Speaker. On several occasions when I have stood in this Parliament, other Members have stood in this Parliament, and we have called for the Children's Life Fund Act to be amended, and the fact that they refused to amend the legislation to allow more children to benefit from the Children's Life Fund, that is abuse, that is neglect, that is the failing of state institutions that relates to children.

Madam Speaker: Member, I am ruling on this. It is not general abuse, general neglect. It was done in a particular context. Okay? And I am not going to let you widen it in the way that you are doing it. If you are going to tie those things to the abuse in the environment of the children, I will allow it, but not in that general way which you are seeking.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, can I turn your attention to part of the Motion that says:

And whereas several State agencies have indicated that there is a work

overload within the system to particularly address matters affecting children.

This has to do specifically, Madam Speaker, with the public health care system, which many state agencies fall under the public health care system, as well as the Children's Life Fund. So therefore, this is the part of the Motion that I am tying it into as it relates to:

And whereas several State agencies have indicated that there is a work overload within the system to particularly address matters affecting children.

Madam Speaker, I will also turn to the issue—

Madam Speaker: As I say again, I will give you a “lil” leeway but I do not see this recital as standing on its own and it ties back with, in my view, to your recital one and your recital two. Okay?

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, briefly I would like to touch on the aspect of education as it relates to the neglect of children in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, prior to the pandemic we were told that over 60,000 children in this country were without devices. In 2021, then we were told 35,000 were without devices. We were then told 2,000 had dropped out. Madam Speaker, this speaks specifically to the neglect of our nation's children by those who have been entrusted to seek their interest.

Madam Speaker, when schools—Rami Trace Hindu, Parvati Girls, Shiva Boys, Presbyterian No. 1, Reform Hindu School. All these schools remain closed. This speaks specifically to the neglect of the welfare and well-being of the children of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: I want to remind this honourable House, Madam Speaker, that it was in 2014— It was not the UNC saying this, it was the World Economic Forum that said the best place for a child to be born in terms of the top three countries was Trinidad and Tobago, under an administration led by the hon. Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, in the few moments that I have left remaining, I know a matter was brought to the House with respect to a privileges matter, and it has been in the public domain and I will tie this with respect to neglect and the abuse of children, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, we are exemplars—

Madam Speaker: I do not know of any privileges matter before the House. Okay?

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, I will refer to it with respect to being in the public domain, having been raised in the public domain. And, this has to do specifically with the neglect, the abuse of children, but also in the context that we are exemplars, or we are supposed to be exemplars, and therefore when there are allegations of molestation of a Member of this House who is somebody's daughter and somebody's child, Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Member, I am not going to allow that. I rule on Standing Order 48(1).

Mr. B. Padarath: Certainly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I will go no further with that except to say that today I have made a clear case—

Madam Speaker: Member, you go no further than that. Go on to a new point.

Mr. B. Padarath: Certainly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I have made a clear case in terms of the items outlined in the Motion, with respect to a lack of duty of care, dereliction of duty on the part of the Members of this Government who have demonstrated that they are not part of the solution but rather they are part of the problem. I have been at pains to show how their lack of political will, their inaction over the years, has contributed significantly to the exploitation, the neglect, and the abuse of our nation's children, Madam Speaker.

And, Madam Speaker, no amount of deflection will change the fact that this Government has failed our nation's children. This is your opportunity to tell the country what you have done. You are in charge, and tell us what you have done for seven years to protect our nation's children, because every other piece of evidence, every other report points to the fact that you have failed our nation's children, and that your policies are not data-driven, and we want to hear real tangible solutions. We do not want to hear about any Sabga report, we do not want to hear about any old talk and "lacaray". What the country wants to hear today is real tangible data-driven solutions that will have an immediate and long-term impact on the lives of our nation's children, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, our nation's children, their lives are at stake. We are seeing that day and day and day, especially when more and more information keeps coming out into the public domain. And, therefore, I implore colleagues from both sides of the House to let us come up with effective data-driven solutions. There are a lot of them that are contained in this Justice Judith Jones report but it has fallen on deaf ears because we have been saying that on this side since 2015/2016. But,

the Member for Tobago East, together with the Member for Diego Martin West, and others, they must be held responsible for what has happened to our nation's children. And what has happened to our nation's children is a sad state of affairs under their watch.

With those few words, Madam Speaker, I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: This Motion requires a seconder.

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, I beg to second the Motion and reserve the right to speak later in the proceedings.

Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: Member for Tobago East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy): Thank you, Madam Speaker, for allowing me the opportunity to join the debate on the Motion brought by the hon. Member for Princes Town. I have taken note of some of the Member's concerns, and I would like to reassure the Member and this honourable House that the care and protection of children, as well as the wellbeing of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, has always been at the heart of our work as a Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Regardless of our circumstances, Madam Speaker, we have never wavered in our commitment to putting people first, nurturing our greatest asset, which is a key component of our *Vision 2030* agenda.

Madam Speaker, since assuming office in 2015, the vision of this Government has been to ensure that all children are happy, healthy and confident, and that their rights are respected, protected and promoted to facilitate their holistic development towards achieving their fullest potential as constructive members of society, now, and in the future. Through the work of the Gender and Child Affairs Division and partnering agencies, this mandate continues to be realized. The Division upholds the internal, international and regional agreements which guide all the strategic and programming implementation.

Madam Speaker, my colleagues on the other side accused Government of there being a number of reports of child abuse under our tenure. May I remind my colleague that child abuse is a local and global occurrence not limited to any one government, administration, leader, or country. Based on statistics published on June 8th 2020 from the World Health Organization, globally it is estimated that up to one billion children aged two to 17 years have experienced physical, sexual or emotional violence or neglect in the past year.

2.25 p.m.

This is concerning but it demonstrates that we are dealing with a global issue that will not be resolved immediately or by any single individual or agency. The Gender and Child Affairs Division and the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago have been championing the cause of childcare and protection since inception. However, for us to prevent and eventually stop child abuse we must continue to use an all of society approach with all hands on deck, including those on the Opposition Bench, state agencies, the media and the citizens. We need all hands on deck, Madam Speaker. We must hold each other accountable. Yes, the reality is that some children are being lost to many heinous forms of abuse and

neglect in Trinidad and Tobago. But we all as citizens have an individual and collective part to play in ending these horrific crimes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: It should be noted, Madam Speaker, that a generalized designation of incompetence—

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, 44(10), please.

Madam Speaker: Okay, so, hon. Member you know it is a debate and I would ask you not to be tied so closely to your notes unless it is some reference that you are actually quoting.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It should be noted that a generalized designation of incompetence on the part of any one entity's operation is neither true or fair. The child protection machinery is much larger than any single body or organization. The efficient operation of our child protection machinery or system is contingent on each individual component cooperating to achieve the desired goals. At the macro level the child protection machinery speaks to our local and international partners and collaborators as well as our suite of legislations, programmes, policies that guide our actions to end all forms of child abuse and neglect.

Madam Speaker, when you look at the core of all the components that I outlined earlier you will notice one common denominator. People, Madam Speaker. We are all responsible—

Mr. Indarsingh: Madam Speaker, 44(10). The Minister—

Madam Speaker: Okay, so, I have cautioned the Minister on that already and let us proceed with the debate. Minister, remember it is a debate.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Thank you, Madam Speaker. We are all equally responsible, Madam Speaker, every single one of us, for our nation's children. No

one could deny that. Madam Speaker, actionable recommendations were highlighted in a Judith Jones report and I recognize that recommendations would promote greater support for our childcare protection system. However, the recommendations must be moved into actions. And again, the common denominator for that to happen would be people.

Madam Speaker, this is where we are at, but it is not where we will stay. Several measures aligning with the recommendations were already in the works and have been pushed by the Gender and Child Affairs Division and other partnering agencies such as the Children's Authority to ensure that history does not repeat itself. While not flawless, our policy framework for children's care and protection is relatively comprehensive. Madam Speaker, I will detail the roles and achievements of some of the key agencies to showcase the Government's efforts to establish a robust childcare and protection machinery. And I will start with the core role and function of the Gender and Child Affairs Division.

Madam Speaker, the Gender and Child Affairs Division leads on the strategic implementation of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child at a national level. We are guiding the transition of state homes, we are providing a secure and nurturing environment for all children and we are developing comprehensive and coherent and harmonized initiatives to promote, protect and ensure that our children's rights are respected. As you may be aware, Madam Speaker, the Children's Authority is a specialized agency responsible for care and protection of children especially those who are at risk and have been victims of abuse or neglect.

The Children's Authority is guided by the Children Act and is:

"...responsible for...

- Receiving and investigating reports of mistreatment of children

- Making applications to the Court for the protection and placement of children received into the care of the Authority
- Establishing and maintaining places of safety, assessment and support centres, and reception centres
- Monitoring children's community residences, foster care...and nurseries
- Issuing and revoking licences for community residences and nurseries
- Providing assistance to the Counter-Trafficking Unit in respect of child victims
- Supporting the youth justice system”

Madam Speaker, the Children Act is supported by a number of government policies and the national child policies at the forefront, serving as a guide for all child serving agencies. The national policy on gender and development is also included through our Green Paper with the goal of protecting children and families by promoting their health and wellness and fostering channels for community engagement. The Children Act is also supported by the Ministry of Education's code of conduct policy and the Ministry of Health's sexual and reproductive health policy.

Additionally, the Ministry of Health in 2020 finalized the National Sexual and Reproductive Health Policy. This policy focuses on adolescent sexual and reproductive health by facilitating improved access to comprehensive age appropriate sexuality education information and services for the adolescents and youth both in and out of the education system. Moreover, the Ministries of Health and Education will finalize the health promoting school policy to implement culturally sensitive and coordinate the school health services and programmes.

Madam Speaker, we are doing our work backed with a strong policy framework.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, thus far the Ministry of Health and regional authorities have created three adolescent health clinics to improve access to care for adolescents. This was not done in a vacuum, Madam Speaker, but in accordance with a comprehensive policy framework that underpins childcare and protection and the childcare and protection machinery.

So, Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Princes Town was mistaken when he said that policies do not exist. Policies are in place to protect children and we continue to look at the gaps with the aim of filling those gaps. Many milestones and considerable progress in the childcare and protection system have occurred under this Government. I wish to highlight some of the significant progress made in terms of legislative reform. During the past six years some of the achievements include, the amendment of the suite of children's legislation to give further direction and clarification on the rights of children in need of care and protection. In Trinidad and Tobago, under this Government, child marriage has been abolished giving children—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—the freedom to live their lives free from any adult obligations and enjoy their childhood. It is also worth noting, Madam Speaker, that the Domestic Violence Act was amended to further protect victims especially children under this administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, in terms of infrastructure there has been notable progress. Regardless of what my hon. colleague would have said, there has been progress. It is all well and fine to say that nothing has been done but

sometimes you must put the politics aside and speak the truth.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: There has been some progress. Madam Speaker, to ensure that the most vulnerable are secured and protected Government has built and/or commissioned four child assessment centres in Ste. Madeleine, Tobago, Sangre Grande and Chaguanas. My hon.friend from Naparima did not want to take pictures with me when we commissioned his facilities. He came but he ducked and danced away from me.

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: You came and you ducked and danced away from me when time came for us to take some pictures.

Madam Speaker: Member you would like to make a suggestion?

Mr. Charles: Not at this time, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Yeah, sure, okay, please continue. Let us all proceed in accordance with the Standing Orders. Continue please, Member.

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, two additional child support centres, two transition homes for boys and girls. The girls' transition homes will be commissioned soon. And we began refurbishment of the St. Michael's School for Boys which is now under the remit of the Ministry of Youth Development and National Service. So it is unfair to say, Madam Speaker, that nothing has been done.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Furthermore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, state run domestic violence shelters for mothers and their children, including boys, have been active since 2020. All of these infrastructure projects were undertaken to support the care and protection of the nation's children by this administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I move to programmes I want to emphasize that Trinidad and Tobago was the first among many regional countries to develop protection policies and programmes. Regardless of our current circumstances we should all be proud of that fact that we have been a regional leader. Mr. Deputy Speaker, our National Child Policy, the first of its kind in the Eastern Caribbean, sets out a comprehensive framework. The policy aims to mainstream children's needs, coordinate and integrate children's services and cement cross-sectional commitment to policy outcomes and objectives.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: It is the first policy for children in Trinidad and Tobago and the first of its kind in the Eastern Caribbean. Let us celebrate that fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker. All is not lost. We are not doing nothing, we are working, we might face our challenges but we are working diligently—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—to protect the nation's children. Mr. Deputy Speaker, through collaborative efforts in the past six years the Gender and Child Affairs Division trained 3,000 persons of trust, including bus drivers; teachers; coaches; social workers; guidance officers; special education officers through its child abuse training workshop. This was in collaboration with the Trinidad and Tobago Cricket Board; UNICEF; and the Ministry of Education; the Tobago House of Assembly and the Public Transport Service Corporation. We recognize Government cannot fulfill this obligation to our children on its own. We appreciate the assistance of our local and international partners. And today I want to say thank you, thank you to all our collaborators and partners who would have stood with us in the vineyard.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the mission of child protection involves a highly

coordinated approach that adapts in response to evolving growing needs. We continue to demonstrate this through the initiatives we roll out in collaboration with various partners. Again through collaboration, Mr. Deputy Speaker, child abuse courses were developed. The first course was entitled “The Child Abuse Awareness Quick Course” and was done in collaboration with UNICEF, the University of the West Indies, the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago, the Child Protection Unit of Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and the Pan American Development Foundation. The courses offered both in English and Spanish and ran for a duration of 30 minutes. We allowed citizens to learn at their own pace.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, over 10,000 participants completed that course in 2021 and I am happy to note that the Child Affairs Division won the 2021 Inter-American Development Bank Pr.A.I.S.E People’s Choice Award for Innovation in the public service for this particular initiative; 10,000 persons trained at their own time, at their own pace so they could better understand childcare and protection done by this administration.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Gender and Child Affairs Division has since successfully developed its second child protection online programme. It was launched in April 2022 during our observance and commemoration of child abuse awareness month. Unlike the child protection Quick Course, the new online course takes a form of a Child Protection Animated Quiz. And it was developed by children for children and adults. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is something for us to feel proud about. I am proud to highlight the fact that the Child Protection Animated Quick Quiz was a visionary one. The project placed children at the forefront having included the input of our 2020 cohort of Child Rights Ambassadors and their vision was developed with the guidance of the Gender and

Child Affairs Division and UNICEF. The Quick Quiz includes an animated video which tackles stress, child abuse and drug use and provides viewers with a new data and tips to respond to these issues.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, our goal is for at least half of all students to view the new animation and take the quiz. We see our children and their involvement as crucial in addressing issues that are important to them and future generations. This child-centered approach is encouraged because it allows children to be heard and their needs to be incorporated into policy and programme development.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, to accommodate the growing demand for online resources and convenience requirements of our population, the Gender and Child Affairs Division established the Child Zone which is an online platform featuring parenting tips and child-friendly resources. Child Zone includes child protection material developed over the years, such as the *My Book of Rights and Responsibilities*, *Reach Out: A Guide to Child Friendly Services* and the child abuse awareness workbook. Hundreds of thousands of printed copies of these resources have been distributed. We have taken into account that not every child has access to internet and technology provisions.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, to bridge this we would have partnered with NALIS to ensure that our mental health workbook has been shared to our nation's children through the library system. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in our attempt to reach the widest possible cross-section of the population we have gone so far as to distribute printed brochures and flyers and information with the support of TTPost and distributed over 300,000 pieces of information to families and we focused on our rural communities because we have our commitment to leave no child behind.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are committed to ensuring that

children not only become aware of their rights, but they become versed in ways in which they may access help and protection. We are empowering the nation's children so that they become their own change champions and change agents. Let me take this opportunity, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to remind our nation's children and those who may be viewing, that help is available if you are in need of help. If you are in imminent danger help is available. Please, remember to reach out on our hotlines. Contact the police at 9-9-9, ChildLine at 1-3-1 or the Children's Authority at 9-9-6. If you require help, reach out. If you do not reach out we will not get the information to assist you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, our Child Rights Ambassadors Programme has been vital in advancing child-related issues. The Division of Gender and Child Affairs through our Child Rights Ambassador Programme would have worked with children at both our schools as well as our community residences. The initiative to date has educated 500 children ages 10 to 16 about the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In November 2021, 183 students from primary and secondary schools as well as children with disabilities and those living in community residences participated in the Child Rights Ambassadors training webinar. In 2020 to 2021, the fourth year of the Child Rights Ambassadors Programme, we happily noted the progress made by some of our alumni, including: Ms. Priyanka Lalla as a UN Youth Advocate and Ms. Ronia Swan and Mr. Sameer Sookhoo as Child Youth Correspondents on the Inter-American Children's Institute.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, four years after she was trained as a child rights ambassador Ms. Priyanka Lalla was selected as part of the national delegation and represented Trinidad and Tobago at COP26, UN Climate Change Conference 2021, in Glasgow Scotland. Mr. Deputy Speaker, all of us, all of us at the Gender

and Child Affairs Division are excited to see what our current cohort of Child Rights Ambassadors would do. I will continue to work with our children and empower them so that they come at the forefront of protecting their rights in this beautiful twin island nation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, from 2016 through 2019, the Gender and Child Affairs Division provided monthly training workshops and capacity building to employees and management of the then 37 community residences. In addition, the Children's Authority, the Centre for Human Capital Development Limited, Epiphany Consultancy Services Limited, the North West Regional Health Authority and other training agencies provided ongoing training to workers in community residences. We focused on behaviour management, trauma, the prevention and management of aggression and violence, marketing, and for the private run homes: fund raising. We focused on conflict resolution and communication.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, because of the pandemic most training activities moved to a virtual environment but they still continued none the less. The Division of Gender and Child Affairs supports children in community residences by providing technical assistance to meet licensing requirements of the Children's Authority, as well as laws and standards and international guidelines. The Authority conducts visits to the community residences which includes inspection of premises. The Authority receives ongoing monitoring updates and reports from homes, the homes are required to maintain their records, their files and their logs as outlined in the Children's Community Residences Regulations 2018. These records are reviewed by the Authority. Government is aware of the licensing challenges. Yes, we are aware and I would like to highlight however, that the majority of homes that are not licensed require infrastructure improvement in order to get their licences. For example, fire permit, electrical works, fencing issues. Most of these

homes are private institutions that are regularly monitored by the Authority.

Even in the face of infrastructural needs, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we work alongside these homes to try to ensure the care and protection of the children are at a suitable standard. In order to demonstrate its commitment to meeting the needs of children in community residences and state homes, despite financial constraints, Government spent a little more than \$10.7 million on privately run residences and an estimated \$139.2 million on the larger state homes over the last three years. Government has long prioritized ensuring that all children in community residences receive suitable support and as such we developed the payment per child system so that we could ensure that all children within those facilities have access to food, to psychosocial support, to education, to medicine as required.

Furthermore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are allocating an additional \$2,000 per month per child for those children at those privately run homes so that if they need any support medical, psychological, be it, and it could not be found within the public health system, they could access it privately. Mr. Deputy Speaker, beyond that, 50 per cent of the utilities at those privately run homes is facilitated through a rebate system by this Government. Mr. Deputy Speaker, yes, we had our challenges but we have been working diligently. In 2021, the payment per child system was reviewed and proposals were made by the Cabinet for an interim increase in the various categories. We are currently at the stage where we are recruiting a consultant to further review the payment per child system to ensure that any disbursement of those funds, there is greater accountability.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we heard the plight of those children who reached out. We would have seen the recommendations of the report but even in the absence of the report and investigation, we were identifying the gaps within the system and diligently we were working to bridge those gaps, because we understand and we

value the fact that our children are our most valuable asset.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in terms of training I want to highlight the fact that the Gender and Child Affairs Division as a safeguarding measure would have collaborated with the Trinidad and Tobago Registered Nurses Association between 2017 and 2019. Four cohorts have been trained in the three months full-time programme designed to prepare persons who are working with children in a residential setting. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we did not just pick up people from the roadside and put them to train. Persons had to be vetted. They had to do psychometric testing, they had to do police background checks because we wanted to ensure that in training a pool of persons to be available for our community residences in our homes, that we were choosing the best persons, persons who have a passion for children but most importantly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, people who did not have an intention to harm. But even with the best measures in place, you never know the heart of a man. We could screen all we want, we could train all we want, but if somebody is determined to be wicked and evil they will be wicked and evil. But what it is our duty to do, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is to ensure that we have continuous monitoring, continuous evaluation, what is happening, so that we could root out the bad seeds and leave the good to work amongst our nation's children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to highlight that this Government does not intend to cover up instances of child abuse.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: The hon. Member for Princes Town in his contribution alluded to something about us maybe trying to sweep things under the carpet. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you know me, you know I would never cover up anything to do with harm or ill-will or ill-maltreatment of our nation's children. If you know this Government and if you know my leader—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—you would understand, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that he would not let any injustice be done to our nation’s children and turn his back. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we got information coming in over the years, between 2020 and 2021, in particular, persons reaching out to the Division, persons reaching out to me on social media, information coming in, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we decided that we were going to do an investigation because we wanted to get to the root of it. It is all well and good to get here and say, “she say, them say”, but to get the evidence, to get an independent body to go in and to look at the root cause and to make recommendations, that is what we chose to do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I remember there was an incident at the Children’s Authority and the hon. Member for Princes Town mentioned it and at that point in time we asked for an investigation to be done. And I will never forget when the report came back from that committee at that time. I was insisting, fire the person, fire the person, fire the person, and I remember the person who led the investigation said to me never ever, ever, act based on your emotions. Let the facts guide you. And at that time she said to me, the facts are that you do not have a policy in place as yet for this particular matter. It is your duty now to implement, to develop policy and make sure that it is implemented and that is what we did. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, at every stage where we found that we would have been lacking in terms of policies and so forth, we would have taken measures to improve, because Mr. Deputy Speaker, sometimes when we are guided by our emotions you do not always make the best judgment call.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as you are aware the Children’s Authority of Trinidad and Tobago has a major role in protecting our nation’s children. Key among that is child justice. The Authority is responsible for ensuring the administration of child

justice and has achieved the following within its remit: 258 juvenile inventory for functioning and youth level service case management inventory assessments were done; 1,339 matters attended for children in need of supervision and children in conflict with the law; 326 urgent reports submitted to the court; 6,687 monitoring and follow-up engagement with minors. These activities are critical, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for assisting families to manage the challenging behaviour of minors in their care. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 350 physical visits were done by the Children's Authority to communities, homes and schools. In terms of licences and monitoring, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Authority licensed five children's home; suspended operations of two homes; investigated 19 complaints against homes; supported homes through the COVID-19 outbreaks; received 530 children into residential care; children's homes provided care and accommodation for 622 children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want us to talk a little bit about this 622 children. I often say when children end up by me, by my gate, it is because something went wrong. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we need to look at the 622 families and ask them, what are you doing? We have to look at those communities and ask those communities, how are we supporting our vulnerable families so that our children do not end up in care of the State? It is the right of a child to be in a loving stable home.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Children's Authority improved the licences status of 14 children's homes and conducted 240 monitoring visits to children's homes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Children's Authority successfully collaborated with homes for the vaccination of 212 residents and 310 staff of children's homes. They supported the homes through the COVID-19 quarantine periods. They advocated for the establishment of spaces for quarantine and

isolation. I want to say thank you to the regional health authority and to the Heroes Foundation who would have partnered with the Children's Authority and the Gender and Child Affairs Division so that we would have put up a separate facility for quarantining children who would have exposed—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—to the COVID-19 virus.

2.55 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Children's Authority completed a nurseries gap analysis report and recommendations for legislative amendments related to the nurseries. And I want to put Trinidad and Tobago on notice, because you see the fly-by-night way we care for babies, we are going to be monitoring that very closely.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Very, very closely, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Children's Authority collaborated with corporate sponsors to support its funding for unlicensed homes to institute renovation, Mr. Deputy Speaker, even though, as I said before, we have homes that are unlicensed. The vast majority of those homes that are unlicensed are at 70 per cent readiness for licensing and we are working diligently with them to ensure that they are able to get to that stage.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the major works of the Authority is to access children that have entered into the child protection system. These are some of the achievements of the Authority for this fiscal period. They would have done 85 forensic interviews. And if you know what a forensic interview is, you know that means that something might have gone wrong. So again, I want to speak to those 85 persons who would have potentially interfered with 85 children, do better—do better.

Failure to Protect Children
Hon. A. Webster-Roy (cont'd)

2022.05.27

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 381 forensic medical examinations were conducted; 1,780 clinical interviews; 621 physiological assessments, 548 general medical examinations; 233 new multidisciplinary assessments were conducted. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Authority, despite its challenges, despite its resource constraints, would have been trying to work in the best interest of our nation's children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to turn my attention to some of the works that we have in train, and I want to speak specifically—I want to start to speak specifically to the children registry because my honourable colleague from Princes Town would have mentioned it. I do not know if he is not following what is happening within the Gender and Child Affairs Division or he is just ignoring when we put out publications. But just earlier this year we would have done a soft test of the national children's registry, and I think it was last week or two weeks ago I would have gone to Tobago where we would have had those persons who were selected for the data entry process in Tobago for their training. So the registry is well on its way. Yes, we had our hurdles, but the registry is well on its way, and unlike other persons, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I like to give credit where credit is due. We found something good in train, we built on it, unlike those on the other side who would like to often say that nothing was done. I acknowledge the fact that the children's registry commenced under the former administration, but we advanced it, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the national child safeguarding strategy, this is a project that would have emerged from our National Child Policy for implementation in fiscal 2022. Its objectives are to mainstream child protection

as a key component of the rights of children aligned to the principles to preventing gender-based violence; to ensure preventative measures for child abuse; bring awareness and educate the public on child protection and gender-based violence; to foster child protection including prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation in child and youth serving organizations through education and awareness of preventative measures, identification, and referral of instances of child abuse.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are currently reviewing our caregivers training programme because we understand that there are some elements of the course that we need to strengthen to ensure that when persons begin working that they do in fact work in the best interest of the child. Mr. Deputy Speaker, by June of this year—before the end of June of this year, we would commission a migrant home for girls. This is a collaborative effort between the Gender and Child Affairs Division, international partners, as well as the Ministry of National Security, where we are providing a place of safety for those migrant girls who end up in our jurisdiction and who are in need of care and protection.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Princes Town would have noted that when the Children's Authority commenced in 2015, that they would have had a solid framework in place, but to be honest, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is not the fact. We had to build out the Children's Authority and I want to commend the former Attorney General for his work. I want to commend the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs for the support.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, from 2015 to now the Children's Authority would have moved from three facilities to 13, and the Authority indicated that their optimal—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—number of facilities is 15. So we are short by two. Mr. Deputy Speaker, from 100 and something staff to over 300 staff at the Children’s Authority.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not saying everything is perfect, but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, work has been done and we will continue working because this Government will always have at its heart, at the core of its business, our nation’s children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, they could call me self-righteous, they could say I am crying crocodile tears, but until I am no longer in the position to advocate for children I am going to advocate. And I could only—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—give you the commitment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Cabinet, the Minister of Finance, the hon Prime Minister, all my colleagues, they have all championed the cause of children in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, people like to say the Minister of Finance hand tight, but when it comes to children he has always found creative ways to ensure that we will receive our allocation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*’]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: I want to reassure the children of Trinidad and Tobago that we have heard you, we are going to continue to fight for you, and soon we intend to see a better Trinidad and Tobago. But, we must all as citizens—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy:—do our part. It is up to each and every one of us to do the work that is required to safeguard our nation’s children. It is not up to me as

Failure to Protect Children
 Hon. A. Webster-Roy (cont'd)

2022.05.27

Minister or the Government, it is up to each and every single citizen of this country. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Tabaquite, and Member you have 30 minutes.

Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this very important Private Members' Motion, where we, as a Parliament, are looking at the treatment of children under the system and our state enterprises, and I want to draw the Parliament's attention, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to the last recital:

Be it resolved that this House...”—calls—“...on the Government to implement effective data driven policies, and to take all urgent steps to protect the children of this nation immediately and...”—to—“...reprimand this Government for its failure to effectively protect and support our nation's children.”

And I just took the opportunity to read that, and I want to congratulate the Member for Princes Town for bringing this Motion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: We in this House are all aware of the reason the Motion is here at this time given what has consumed the news of the nation for the past month, but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I listened very intently to the Member for Tobago East, it is almost as if it was not the Minister herself who brought the Judith Jones report to this Parliament.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, because, as I listened to the Minister and I wish that I would be able to celebrate the wins with her, but if indeed all of the wins that the Minister raised were really as she presented, then we would not have had that

Judith Jones report, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: The report very simply would not exist. And the existence of the report shows exactly the reason for the Motion, that no matter what you do, what you say, and how much you try to convince us that the things that you have on paper are working for the protection children because the report shows they simply are not, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And so, absent very clearly from the Minister's contribution today, absent from the Minister's contribution and she spoke to the nation today was: What are the effectiveness of all of the laundry list of things that you called out here for us? Are any of these proposals, any of the things that you have in place, have they been—and I heard the Minister mentioned the monitoring and evaluation, but what is the effectiveness? Because again, when you look at the reports, when you look at the news, Mr. Deputy Speaker—and for the last month we have been seeing reports revealing sexual and physical abuse in children's homes, reports find that staff instigates beating, the failure to act on decades of abuse and allegations. Mr. Deputy Speaker, point after point, news report after news report, a report laid by the very Minister who just spoke showed very clearly to the nation that something is wrong and, therefore, we cannot be chastised for not celebrating when none of these children can celebrate.

None of these children who are in the system as it stands, who stand unprotected as it were, can celebrate. And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in my preparation to contribute here today—and I have always had an issue with the talk and no action approach—the reason the Motion speaks to the implementation of effective data-driven policies, the reason we are asking for immediately steps to be taken, is because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we take a look at the reports that have faced

our nation, and when we just use some common sense, you would see that the announcements that have been made have not redound to any standardized policy or implementation across the board that we can deem to be effective at this time. And my contribution here today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am looking very specifically at the education of our children within the State spaces, and I am also looking very clearly at whether or not we are adequately providing for the mental health of our of students—of these children, of these young people, whether that is being taken care of within these spaces.

Our Motion here today talks about the overwhelming number of reports of children being abused, and the reason the overwhelming number of reports have come to us, again, is because of this Judith Jones report, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And when I read that report I took myself back to a debate in the other place, a debate piloted by the very same Member for Tobago East in 2018, I believe it was, where we looked at a Motion on the regulations for children's homes and children's rehabilitation centres. And just like today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister then raised all of the work that they intended to do. They raised what they planned on doing and how it was going to improve the child care system; how what we were doing in Parliament then would for the sake of our children take out the uncertainties within children's home and rehabilitation centres. It was part of a childcare plan and package as we were told then, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And I listened to Minister at that time, and as the nation would have as well trusted, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the things that were being said, the things that we were told in 2018 that would be done in short order because of the critical nature, because of how important it is for the protection of our children, we were told then that they would be done, and implemented, and operationalized, and that we would see the results. And yet still, I stand here in 2022, in another place, on another

debate, that has showed us that when they talk, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we simply cannot trust them to act—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes—and that is the problem that we are facing.

If you listen only to the Minister's response today, it is as if the Minister did not exist within the space for the last month, have not recognized the horrors that we have all been told. Because today, today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what we needed to hear was what is going to be done differently going forward; what are you going to engage; what are you going to do in the short-term, the medium-term and the long-term. And it is not sufficient to give us the same promises that we had in 2018, 2019, and we have been hearing it over and over and over, and our children are suffering.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we talk about that children have a right to grow up in a safe supportive environment devoid of abuse, exploitation, harassment and neglect, no one in this Chamber can disagree. No one in this Chamber can say that it is not something that ought to occur. And therefore, when we look at what the Judith Jones report had to say, it is clear that is not happening now. It is clear that is not the case. And then when we say that the State has a duty of care to protect all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago especially the children, and that their policies have not been effective on safety, security, health and education, that also I think no one can dispute. And so I appreciate that the Members opposite, Members on the Government side, would have a very hard time defending this Motion, defending themselves against this Motion today, because they have to agree with the things that are place before us because they are existing right now.

I took a look at this Judith Jones report specifically looking at the education

spaces, Mr. Deputy Speaker, thinking about children's homes and rehabilitation centres and understanding right now we are faced with an education sector that is currently very inequitable, that where you have children, persons who cannot get access to devices, who cannot get access if they are back in the school system, if you are unwell, if you are impoverished, there are a number of things in terms of the rising cost of education. But I am looking at it in terms of the persons in these children's homes and the report specifically looked at the Valsayn assessment centre, Valsayn assessment, sorry, and it spoke about a lack of structured educational activities that have been complained about by residents who have openly stated that they missed their classes at these facilities and they want to get an education.

And so when my colleague from Princes Town raised this Motion, and when my colleague from Princes Town spoke about the fact that the State has failed in its duty of care to provide education spaces, he is indeed very correct. When we read through the report, when you think about what is currently at play, if you are by definition amongst our most vulnerable, amongst the group of children who are not in a safe space in your home, if you are amongst the children who you are not excited to go to your own home and you have to be placed in one of these children's home, or if you are one of the children who—and I want to stress that we are talking about children here, everybody under the age of 18. If you are one of the children who, because of your particular circumstance, because of the space that you have been in, what you have been exposed to, that you have run afoul of the law and you are placed in one of the rehabilitation centres, when we dealt with the regulations back then, we all recognized the importance of holding these children close, of ensuring that they have safe spaces to grow and to mature and to become productive citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And then to learn in 2022 that

all that the State could have done is cannot being done, I respectfully cannot take the submission of the Member for Tobago East.

The Member for Tobago East needed to tell us why after telling us in 2018 and 2019 that we will improve the childcare plan, and that as you enter these spaces we will looking at your education specifically, we will be looking at your mental health, we will be affording you these assessments, why is it that all of these lofty promises from then we are finding out that they do not have basic needs right now, Mr. Deputy Speaker? When you look at the report again, they said that the staff in some of these places that there is no adequate funding, no adequate implementation of educational courses, that the systems themselves have not been modified or codified to form what the community residents need so that when they come out they are better for it.

Is this not the dereliction of the duty of care that the Member for Princes Town spoke about? I mean when you think about it, when you read the reports that are coming out, when you see the results of what happens when children come out of these homes, come out of these places, you are part of the problem in creating a society that we are afraid of, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When we look at what is happening in the rehabilitation centres, the report itself, the report laid by the Member for Tobago East, speaks of St. Jude's residents who were not part of the traditional school system they have limited access to available schooling choices. What does that mean, Mr. Deputy Speaker? What does that mean for young people, like I said, the most vulnerable, the most in need of extra care and attention? What does that mean when they cannot access basis, limited access to available schooling choices?

When you look at the Tobago child support centre, we are told that there is no assigned room. Listen, we heard from the Minister about infrastructural

developments, but in the Tobago child support centre there is no assigned room for study, for schoolwork, for you to be able to do your work. Only a reading corner, and children often use administrative areas located upstairs. So that by and large you are not even offered a space to educate yourself, much less educational opportunities you are not even offered a physical space to educate yourself. And then the Minister tells us today that we must join in celebration, and again I say we on this side absolutely disagree.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: We were told, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that Mary Care north had the space for education. The classroom was located in the back of an office with a non-functional computer, and it also served as a storage area for cribs. That is the report that this very same Minister who told us shortly that we should join in celebration, laid in this Parliament, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When—and that is looking at physical spaces whether or not they have the basics, and you want us—

When the Member for Naparima encourages the Government to think bigger, and to think globally, and to think about what is being implemented elsewhere, you are talking about countries where you have proper psychometric testing, where you have the proper evaluation of children going into homes, where you can streamline educational opportunities to ensure that you are really putting intensive care to those who are most in need, but we are failing our students with most basic needs, a space. Imagine you are telling children prioritize your education. You are in the State's care, you are expected to have a space to grow and develop to your fullest potential, but are doing it in the back of a classroom next to a storage space for cribs. I mean that is, again, not worthy of celebration at all, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

When we look at the child support centres which the Minister listed as an

achievement when Minister spoke to the—it was listed as part of the things being done. We were told that in child support centres you have space where the students who are going in—the children who are going in because there is no streamlining or no testing going into the system, that the staff are faced with a problem in how to deal with the training for these children. So that everybody is lumped together, everybody is in one space, and you all are expected to deal with it. So regardless of what the particulars of your situation are, you are now in a space with undertrained or untrained staff, especially caregivers, limited to no access to psychological services, and all of these things, all of these things lead to a bigger problem in the future.

Because let us use some common sense here, let us think about what it is. If you have a child with a behavioural problem on the highest, most abusive end of the spectrum, and you have a child with an issue on the shy, quiet end of the spectrum, and you are all lumped into the same place, you add to that untrained/undertrained staff members, you are creating a space, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the existence of the Judith Jones report. You are creating a space for the report to exist because you are simply not thinking through your policies. And so, that is why we on this side continuously and will continuously ask for data-driven policies. Because if you are collecting the data as it were, if you are telling us where you are getting the data and you are doing sufficient monitoring and evaluation, simple problems like this would not exist.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: You would know, for example, that you cannot have all the children in the same space. You would understand that you must have some streamlining. You would understand that in particular when you look at children's home and children's rehabilitation centres, that the mental health component you

are dealing with young persons, with children who have come from a traumatic space by definition. You would understand that that should be the top priority.

And what I am hearing here, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a fundamental lack of understanding by this Government because it too easy for them to come and list out what they considered to be accomplishments. It is too easy for them to list out pieces of legislation that have been passed and not properly implemented. It is too easy for them to say, “Look, we doing the work you know. We are trying our very best.” But the facts show us that your best is not good enough. It is not even making—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes:—the cut to be mediocre. It is not easy. This is not good enough.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are told from the investigation that many students, many young persons, many of these children come out of these community residents and child support centres again which were listed as an achievement by this Minister; that many of them come out with they are not provided with adequate resources, opportunities to access education; many exist with little to no academic qualification after their stay; that one teacher supports two child support centres comprising 19 children of varying levels of ability including learning disabilities, and we are supposed to celebrate that, Mr. Deputy Speaker? I say no. Absolutely not! We cannot are stand here and say it is good enough that the child support centre exists, and we pat ourselves on the back and we all move on. That could never be good enough.

When we are then told that one teacher supposes two child support centres. Mind you, all of this exists in a space where we have a Minister of Education telling persons do not bother to apply for the teaching service because we have too many applicants, but they have one teacher supporting 19 children across two

centres? So you have no vacancies, you have no space for persons, but you are under resourced. You see again, we are living in a complete dystopian reality, Mr. Deputy Speaker—complete.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: The Member for Princes Town was very careful to raise what were the recommendations, what was going to be done, what is next. The Member for Tobago East followed with no reference at all to possible recommendations, no reference at all to what is going to be next. When I looked through what was going on in these facilities in terms of mental health care for these children, I reflected on the manifesto of the United National Congress, Mr. Deputy Speaker—a part of it that I have always stood very proud to speak on—where Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar had promised that we would introduce psychometric testing for all students across the board.

3.25 p.m.

So that when you are entering the school system, this is an acknowledgement that not all students are the same, that not everybody that goes into the system should be treated the same; how are you learning at your best, at your fullest potential. Now, this is a very easy thing to implement, if you take it from the training policy. If you take a number of our students who are out of the university system with psychology degrees, et cetera, who are unemployed or underemployed and you implement it in the training programme so you fit a specific need because you recognize it as a responsible Government that there is a need to support our students in their learning, our students in and outside of these children's homes. And then, if you do that, instead of saying "we slash GATE, we cut the funding, we cannot find the money for it", you say we offer specific educational funding for students going into these spaces so that you get the

training, you get the cadre of human, warm bodies into these spaces. That shows you how policy, it lines up with implementation, it lines up with national development and it is not simply old talk. That is how you ought to implement systems like this.

Instead, we hear about the gaps, we hear about where there are things. I think the Minister said that they are doing the assessments but if you are wicked, “yuh” will be wicked. I mean, respectfully, that means your assessments are failing. Your assessments are failing and that is it. Right. Now, all systems cannot be perfect but from the Judith Jones report and the prevalence that we are seeing, it is clear your system is failing. So it is not a question of whether or not you have it, it is a question of whether or not it is working and that is what we are saying here today, you know. We have read what is on the Ministry’s website, we have seen what they have had to say. We have gotten the copybooks, et cetera. We have gotten the posters. Is it working? The answer is no and that is why we are here today with this critical Motion.

It is not a back and forth. It is not a back and forth about what you could do, what should be done. No. It is a clear recognition that the Government policy, the implementation of proper government policy, can change the facts that we saw in the Judith Jones report. That is clear as day. And therefore, no amount of excuses, no amount of rationalizing why or how, no amount of appeals for more time would be sufficient here today. What you have to tell us is that you have recognized that you have failed. That is the first part. Recognize that you have failed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And then upon that recognition, what are you prepared to do differently not to fail again? Because you cannot tell me that we must accept repeated failure simply because you are telling us you have these programmes in

place. It is not good enough. You are talking about the lives of the next generation of Trinidadians and Tobagonians. If you get this wrong, you get our society wrong for the next generation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: You are creating a problem that any next government, next two governments, next three governments, it would be impossible to solve, simply because you wanted to accept mediocrity today, less than mediocrity in fact.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: That you are asking us to absolve you of your failures as the Executive, not for one year, not for two years, not for three years but for about seven years now, you are telling us give you more time, let things work. You are failing. You are failing a next generation of Trinidadians and Tobagonians and that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is unacceptable.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. A. Haynes: And so as I wrap up my contribution here today, I think it is imperative on us as Members of this Parliament to recognize that there is an Executive function in the protection of our children. That in that Executive function, you have both policy and implementation. And that the existence of the Judith Jones report shows that both policy and implementation have continued to fail our children. I think that it is important that, as persons interested in national development, it is safe to say that we can indeed reprimand this Government for its failure to protect and support our nation's children. But in doing so, we are saying to you, do better. Do better because better can be done and our children deserve it. And I thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, you have 30 minutes.

The Minister in the Ministry of Education (Hon. Lisa Morris-Julian): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I notice something that our friends on the other side seem to have left out in their Motion. Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I begin my contribution, I have read and reread the Motion before the House today and my friends on the other side have worded the Motion wrongly. They omitted to use the word “our” in front of children because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, all children in this country are ours.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: No matter your political affiliations, it is our duty to protect, it is our duty to safeguard, it is our duty—no, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is our responsibility to ensure children are allowed to be children.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a well-known proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child”. Not an entity or an individual can do this task alone. It is a collective effort. Collective which means the responsibility is not just the Government, it is also the Opposition, it is also society’s. As Minister in the Ministry of Education, I am here to outline what we are doing from the education aspect of this Motion, and what can be expected in months to come. In 2001, the Ministry of Education by Cabinet Minute No. 430 recognized the negative impact of the external environment on students within the education system, thus identifying, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the need to address the psychosocial demands of children and to strengthen the Student Support Services. But again, it was a PNM Government that made it right.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would expect that the Members on the other side,

because this is a serious topic, to have some level of decorum because when we speak about children, it is not time for political carrions to carry on. It was created but never fleshed out until Hazel Manning stepped into place. She placed a policy of scholarships to train social workers and the support staff. The PNM Government also gave a series of scholarships and bursaries specifically for those in the field of supporting children.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the services offered by the school social workers are a pivotal connection between students, schools, parents, communities and our Government social services agencies and all other civil societies for that matter. Some of these issues addressed by school social workers: child abuse, mental health, teen parenting, chronic absenteeism, substance use and grief, loss and yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, violence. The approach used by the school social workers is both preventative and responsive, training through parenting in education, teacher information sessions and outreach about concerns directly affecting students.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I heard the hon. Member for Tabaquite speak about the basic education provided at the St Jude's Home. I would like to tell and to remind our friends on the other side, the St Jude's Home is not a forever home. It is our aim to help them heal, to grow and to move them back as functioning members of the society. Just recently, there was an art display in Parliament by the very same members of the St Jude's Home. And I would also like to say that the Minister for gender affairs is a patron of the St Jude's Home and every time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, she has the opportunity, she visits those girls and she interacts with them because we believe we have to lead by example.

The Ministry of Education has recently received financial support by UNICEF to initiate a project for early detection and intervention for learners with special education needs. We have also initiated a review for the strengthening of

the systems for the monitoring and evaluation of critical, educational processes through school-based management. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we know how important the intervention process is. The provision of on-going professional development opportunities for teachers at all levels.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right, Members, please again. Hon. Member, ever since you have arrived, you know you have been constantly, you know. Please, keep it on hushed tones please, it is reaching my ear. Okay?

Hon. Member: Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. For the year and I quote, from the period 2019 to March 2022, 143 psycho-educational assessments were completed, 195 in 2020 to 2021: 54 functional behavioural assessments and 44 in progress, 54 behavioural intervention plans and 44 in progress; online support, 10 completed, 10 in progress. Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the other side keeps speaking about data but up to now, not one person will walk with the numbers because the numbers speak of the efforts on this side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Mr. Deputy Speaker, over 31,000 parents benefitted from the following: individual counselling; targeted group work; 25,000 parents and students benefitted from the parenting in education sessions. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 14,218 parents benefitted from the following sessions: coping with online learning, parenting in education, teacher information sessions, critical incidence debriefing sessions, coping with anxiety, changing your position, the role and function of the parent, parental involvement in online learning, nurturing your child's mental health, positive and negative uses of social media, building healthy parent and

Hon. L. Morris-Julian (cont'd)

child relationships, understanding child sexual abuse, effective discipline, parenting styles, parental concerns, positive parenting, managing and learning devices, choices, consequences and decision-making. Does that not sound like a government at work?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Mr. Deputy Speaker, positive behaviour support aims to sensitize and train educators to use proactive strategies to assist students. For those students who we are seeing displaying inappropriate or violent behaviours, these sessions are tailored for the supervisors and the teachers so that we can help these children that need the help. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Social Work Unit also provides specialized forms of intervention guided by systems framework. School social workers employ culturally relevant and appropriate strategies and techniques when approaching our dear children. Care and protection of our students, crisis intervention, individual and group counselling, family intervention, home visits, teacher advocacy, community engagement, consultation, networking and external referrals.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the School Social Work Unit engages in training. It is a national programme. They have monthly staff meetings. They go out on field visits and every single school can access this particular unit. To date, the Social Work Unit currently has a staffing of 90 per cent qualified with a degree in social work, many of them have Masters and we are currently actively looking to go to the full 100 per cent. There are frequent staff meetings in the Ministry of Education to ensure quality assurance. The social workers hold fortnightly visits with all of the senior school supervisors and termly meetings with all staff. Despite the positive, there have been some shortcomings and our social workers are burdened. It is not an easy thing to deal with the problems of others, it is not an easy thing to listen to

the cries, so the Ministry of Education is there to support with an employee programme where they can access guidance, counselling themselves. A school is supposed to be a safe haven.

Statistics have revealed that there have been reports of sexual harassment, students against teachers, on-going disciplinary matters, sexual interactions between students. From 2017 to date—to 2020, two reports were made in Regulation 19 on two ongoing matters. In 2021, four matters are currently engaging a tribunal. The Ministry of Education fully subscribes to the provisions in the Children Act, Chap. 46:01 and the Sexual Offences Act, Chap. 11:28, which calls for mandatory reporting to law enforcement regarding inappropriate sexual behaviour against children under the age of 18. As a former teacher, I can tell you that many times when a child tells you something in confidence, it is your duty, legally and morally, to go straight to the police. In addition to that, principals are empowered to enquire into reports and follow established procedures. What they cannot do, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is investigate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have listened to my colleagues on the other side and while I think that it is full of contradictions and while I think that you cannot simply speak about you are here for the children, when you are being divisive. I call on them to extend the maturity and let us work together to fix what is broken in the system. There is an institution in America that was founded by a man called Flanagan. He was a Catholic priest, Father Flanagan. The name of the institution is Boys Town. In it, the children run it themselves, they are their own judges, police officers, they run the groceries and they have den mothers, den fathers but they make the decisions. Father Flanagan had a vision of a safe haven for children. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, predators would go wherever they see prey. In every single space where there are children, there would be persons who come for absolutely

the wrong reasons.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have worked with the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services for food card services for low-income families to ensure that basic needs are met, unemployment relief grants, counselling for in-depth family intervention and support, support for socially displaced families, disaster relief. Mr. Deputy Speaker, education system is also overburdened because with all that I am telling you, schools cannot replace the home.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have noted that, and I say this without malice, those on the other side have a shockingly bad history of failing our nation's children.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: It took them two decades-plus to put on the national agenda the frightening detail of what is now referred to by them as the Sabga report. It was a buried hidden report that will be a stain on the other side forever—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian:—showing their utter insensitivity and complete disregard for the lives and generations of young men and women. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish that we would note that it took a year, less than a year, for this PNM Government to do something. When the Judith Jones report came, immediately our Prime Minister took action.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: In a short space of time, a task force was appointed of which the Minister of Education is a key stakeholder. Because this Keith Rowley-led administration recognizes the seriousness of these matters, the report was laid in Parliament to ensure that swift action was taken.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Unlike 23, 24 years ago, the PNM actually laid it in

Failure to Protect Children
Hon. L. Morris-Julian (cont'd)

2022.05.27

Parliament. We want persons held accountable. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is only in the light of this report that the Sabga report emerged from the darkness. Without this administration's report, the report done under the UNC would have stayed buried as their political careers. A sad distant—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence please.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: A sad distant memory of hidden mayhem. This administration is also strongly advocating that action be taken on the Sabga report, having the police investigate these matters with the greatest urgency. Mr. Deputy Speaker, each and every one of us must be on the right side of history.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: In 1997, when this Sabga report was first brought to the attention of the Panday-led government, where was the Member for Siparia? Mr. Deputy Speaker, in 1997, I was still in Sixth Form, but in 1998, I could not forget—oh, sorry, let me take that back, I was in university. I do not want to lie on the *Hansard*, let me take that back. I do not want, and I must say it, the victims of the abuse from over two decades ago will no longer remain silent. For the family members forced to endure all the memories of their abuse for rest of our lives, for those who were not given the opportunity to speak and of the trauma endured, this Government's action through the Jones report has resulted in the police setting up a hotline, the Catholic church setting up an investigation, a task force being created, moneys are being allocated by the Finance Minister to ensure that the recommendations are being implemented and this is just the beginning.

And let me assure you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and by extension, this entire nation and all victims and their family members, that this Government will not stand idly by while their children are exposed to abuse. This lid on this coffin of

UNREVISED

Failure to Protect Children
Hon. L. Morris-Julian (cont'd)

2022.05.27

abuse, secrets, lies and shame has been lifted, thanks to this PNM Government and our Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Once again, the UNC government in the past dropped the ball and now the current Members are suffering from a premature knee-jerk reaction. What I mean to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they always want to put the cart before the horse and that is why their policies, their interventions failed, failed and failed and it took a PNM government to fix each and every one.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Not us, on this side. The PNM Government stands on proactive procedures, understanding that effective change requires sustainable accurate planning followed by relevant actions.

Mr. Tancoo: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 44(10). I am not sure if the Member is still quoting but she seems to be reading consistently and continuously.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Thank you. My colleague with the responsibility for gender and child affairs received a report about five boys absconding from the child support centre. A Member from the other place said he was told not to say anything so the secret and the lies continue to this day. The secrets and—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I continue? Oh. After receiving this report, my colleague knew that something must be done. Therefore, in June 2021, upon the recommendation of the hon. Member for Tobago East and along with the endorsement of this Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago, it was agreed to conduct an independent investigation. The Member for Tobago East set this ball rolling.

Failure to Protect Children
Hon. L. Morris-Julian (cont'd)

2022.05.27

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: Mr. Deputy Speaker, unlike the Members on the other side, this PNM-led administration knew that urgent action was required and no matter what they say, no matter what they do, they cannot move from the fact that this report was laid in full transparency because we are a transparent government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. L. Morris-Julian: We are now awaiting another report to come June 2022 for a concrete action plan to serve and protect our children, for us to deal with the systems which permit abuse. Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, no matter what is said in the public spaces, what we say here matters. We need to work together. We need to put the children first. We need to make sure that we remove all predators from the systems and we need to find out the truth of all past situations. Bring the perpetrators to justice. Let us find justice for all, not just some, because all children matter. Whether the children are from the east, north, south or central, each and every single child of Trinidad and Tobago deserves a government and an Opposition willing to put them first. Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3.55 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Naparima.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Mr. Rodney Charles (Naparima): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It gives me great pleasure to join this debate brought to Parliament by my colleague the Member for Princes Town. When you go to it, you would see that it deals significantly with the problems faced by our youth in Trinidad and Tobago at this time. It says:

“*Whereas* there has been an overwhelming number of reports of children being abused during the”—tenure of the—“current administration.”

And it speaks to something that is close to my heart, the question of data-driven policies and operational procedures to address the problem. And it also speaks to the questions of the policies that exist, that are not effective at this time.

Before I begin, Mr. Deputy Speaker, clearly listening to the Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, I understand the disconnect that this Government has with the population.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: I think I heard, and forgive me if I am wrong, the Member say that the Minister who has responsibility for the care of our children in the Prime Minister's Office, the Member Tobago East, is a patron of St. Jude's School for Girls. If that is the case, that speaks clearly to the disconnect.

When we look at the report, the Judith Jones report. It says:

“St. Jude's

At St. Jude's staff promote a culture that encourages abuse among residents.”

Under the watchful eyes of the patron. And we are talking about our children, the next leaders of tomorrow:

“...encourages a culture of abuse.”

They talk about:

“...a past resident indicated that it was common for staff to instigate themed beatings such as ‘House or Compound...’”

—and this is the word in the report.

“...‘cut ass’. The Management is aware of these beatings and the staff who are instigators.”

I will continue, because we have to live in the real world, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

“There are still implements such as hand cuffs and batons being used in the Home. The Deputy Manager admitted to directing the hand cuffing of a resident as well as admitted to knowing that it was against the law.”

Open and admitted breaking of the law in institutions under the watch of this Government. Do they care about the children of Trinidad and Tobago?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: You know, it hurts when you read the report. I will give—you have to hear it, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I will quote again:

“The child care system inclusive of Child Support Centres and Community Residences have undergone a number of changes within the last three years.”

Under the tenure of this Government.

“As mentioned previously”—for example—“the St. Michael’s Home for Boys, which housed children with high-risk profiles was closed in 2018.”

And you know what? These high-risk children were sent to other schools. And that resulted in the commingling of residents with different needs. It goes on:

“Further, The Authority’s staff was not sufficiently trained to manage these children.”

“Yuh see why Barbados will always be ahead of us? Yuh see why? And then when yuh raise it, dey say go and live Barbados.” But the staff was not trained to handle the problems in these schools.

“The resultant environment can be described as one where staff is apprehensive to carry out their duties in the face of conflict. Therefore, they have been authorized to request assistance from security guards to quell situations which they perceived as uncontrollable.

The mixing of these categories and the relegation of behavioural management to security guards...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is what is going under the watch of this Government, in institutions charged with bringing them up and fulfilling their true destiny. So:

“Accordingly, the security guards dealt with the situation based on varying levels of knowledge and experience, instead of standardised procedures and training.”

And this:

“...resulted in instances of physical abuse by residents and by staff.”

Shameful! Shameful!

But we are told by the Member who spoke before from D’Abadie/O’Meara, that we do not come with data, we talk. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have here data. I could tell you, for example, The Amica House in 13 Hill View Terrace, Curepe, is licensed, 20 boys only, a population capacity 20 girls only from newborns to age 17. I could tell you for the St. Jude’s School for Girls, where is that, the St. Jude’s School for Girls, it is not licensed. How could we have a mentor who is a Minister in a school that is not licensed? What are we talking about? And I could tell her there are 65 girls, ages 13 to 17 in that institution.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, what are we dealing with in the 21st Century in Trinidad and Tobago with our young children? But today, today I will be talking about—under the theme that this Government talks a talk but does not act when it comes to our children. They talk, but do not act.

I want to point out that I had asked—you see why it hurts me? Because when you raise questions in Parliament and you expect answers, you get obfuscation, dance and nonsense coming from the other side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government and the Minister knew something was amiss since September 2021, when a Children's Authority employee was charged, charged. They knew there was a problem with children running away from State-run institutions.

Around the same time, on November 10, 2021, to be exact, I asked, I Rodney Acherson Desmond Charles asked the following question to the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister responsible for child affairs, I asked. And when I ask, I do not do it lightly. I had reason to do it. The question was:

“Given that an employee of the Children's Authority was recently charged with one count of serious indecency against a teenager, will the Prime Minister inform the House of the systems put in place by the Authority to ensure the recruitment of suitably qualified and competent personnel?”

That was the question.

One would have thought that a responsible government, seized of that question for 39 days, because it was for oral answer, they had it for 39 days, a responsible government would have done a detailed and comprehensive investigation, and when they responded to us, it would have been informed by the kinds of information that was available to them, available to them, as we now know in the Judith Jones report. But what you got was obfuscation. I have the answer here. “We do psychometric tests. We do dis test. We do dat test and we do all kinda test.” But the question was: What have you done in terms of recruitment? What do you put in what we call the job description to ensure that you do not get pedophiles? But they do not care. They do not care, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What I got was old talk; the same thing we got from that other side today; old talk, obfuscation, song and dance, dismissive response, you do not know what you are talking about, pejorative remarks; nothing that answered the question that was

before the Minister. Had she answered that question, we would not be in the position that we are in today.

So where are we today? We hear talk about the Sabga report, and how we did nothing. We did nothing. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have here the timeline. You see, facts are stubborn things. I have the timeline. December 1997, the story broke in the *Mirror*. The story broke in the *Mirror*. Dave Millette was the lone journalist that broke the story on the newspaper, the *Mirror*. He wrote six stories. But “yuh see dey doh read. Dey does just come here. Yuh know what Eric Williams call people who only come to Parliament and read something de night before dat dey hand dem?” He called them obscurantist politicians and benighted idiots. That is Eric Williams, not Rodney Charles talking. And he is talking about those who do not do their homework. They would know. Millette wrote six stories in the *Mirror*, outlining in details the findings of the Sabga-led task force, none of which prompted any police action.

Some of the headlines read, Mr. Deputy Speaker:

Sex abuse at children's homes

Other headline:

Incest victim treated as a criminal

Other headline:

Homosexuality home

Other headline:

Pantin can't axe wicked St. Jude's nun

Other headline:

Staffer encourages boys to have sex while he watches.

Oh Lord! What else do you want to act to save the children of this nation? The scripture says: Train up the child in the way he should go and he will not depart

Failure to Protect Children
Mr. Charles (cont'd)

2022.05.27

from it when he gets old.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: All this Government is concerned is to obfuscate, dance, and blame the Opposition, blame the leader the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar. And so long as they could go back to the Sabga report, they will not deal with the report by Judith Jones, which is before our eyes and which details the kinds of sufferation that our children have to undergo under the shameless watch of this PNM kakistocratic administration. That is what we have. So we acted.

In December 1999, the adoption of the Children's Bill:

“An Act to make provision for the regulation of procedures governing the adoption of children and to give effect to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989.”

We acted. We brought a suite, to use the word of the former Attorney General. We brought a suite of legislation to address the issues of the Sabga report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: We dealt—on the 3rd December, 1999, we debated the Children's Authority (Amdt.) Bill and Prof. Ramesh Deosaran, and I quote a little, because it is already in the public domain. He said:

It is commonly called the Sabga Report. The gentleman who did the report under the then Ministry of Social Development was Mr. Robert Sabga who had a destiny of his own.

And he goes on. So if the Government had people who read, who would listen, who would learn, they would know what to do and to act and they would not talk nonsense like the Sabga report existed. No one knew and we did nothing. That is a shameful distortion of the facts that only could come from the side opposite.

We had, in September 2000, a package of children's legislation, report laid

and debated in Parliament. And we had, and it has been quoted, comments by the hon. Robinson-Regis, which indicated that she was seized of the contents of the Sabga report. No amount “ah” dancing, no amount of what we call in stick fighting “carray” and moving could change the fact they knew about the Sabga report.

And we had a suite of legislation: the Adoption of Children Bill, 1999; the Children’s Community Residences, Foster Homes and Nurseries Bill, 18th May, 2015. “Wha else dey want?” What else does this Government want to show that the UNC acted appropriately, legislatively, comprehensively to deal with the issues brought in the Sabga report?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: So we are left—all those legislations were left in abeyance while the Government was in office. And it was only when the UNC came into power that we proclaimed these legislation. So where are we today? We had the date of the Judith Jones Report, 14th December 2021, under the watch of this Government, and there is—when you read that report, you want to cry. You want to cry. You have to say if I were not lucky to be born in the house of a headmaster, who was a Baptist Deacon, Rodney Theophilus Charles, I would have suffered the same fate as these children under the watch of this Government.

You read things that would make you want to puke. Puke. When you come to children’s home, they talk about physical abuse in this home. And they say it includes the:

“...punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, stabbing, choking, hitting (with a hand, stick, strap or other objects), burning, or other forms of harm to...”—children.

Lord have mercy. That—you see if I were a Minister on that side and I seize this information, I going in that house immediately, immediately and get rid of any

staff that even if he is accused, I would rather pay in the court, lose the case than have a child who is looking for hope, looking for hope, but getting sodomized and what a shameful inaction in this report.

We read in the papers where it is said that the persons in the newspaper, the persons who were found guilty are still there as we speak. What else? What else does this Government want to act? You want to actually see the paedophilic act before you get to not have a report?

So we have the Judith Jones report and they have created another committee to think about this report, to operationalize the report. Meanwhile, boys are getting sodomized. Shameful! Shameful! Shameful! We call for action. When you read this report you have to act tonight. “You cyah wait on—six months you keep it and you form ah committee” and you blissfully say: “I await that report, so that I could act to save the children of Trinidad and Tobago.” That is a disgrace! Shame on all of you on that side. I speak, I speak, for the child without a father; a child whose father is in Remand Yard who, because of your laziness and sloth, he has to remain in Remand Yard for six to 10 years, so he grows up without a father. Shame on you all! Shame!

The Judith report, in its recommendation, calls for the following:

Ensure child support centers operate within the confines of the law.

We know that under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, you cannot flog. And the Judith report said that was happening under the watch of this Government, breaking of the law.

The second thing they talk about is:

The establishment of a publicly-funded independent office of the Children’s Commissioner to receive complaints from children in residential care.

O Lord, a child is being abused. He has nobody he can turn to and talk to independent. He has to talk to the same people who are going to abuse him. And this Government will come and give a list. They are very good at lists. “We do dis, we do that, we do that, we do that, we do dat.” They will never tell you We have achieved X. We have a 10 per cent reduction in criminality in the homes. We have eliminated beatings within a year. “Dey never. Dey coming with a list. We do dis, we do dis, we do dat, we do dat.”

The third thing that the Judith Jones report calls for:

Re-evaluation and reorganization of the children system as a matter of urgency.

What does “urgency” mean? Do it now. What the Government does? Send the report to another committee to report back, for “dem to study and then three/four years past, election come, dey fool de people, win de election and de children remain.”

The fourth thing the report calls as a recommendation for action—“dey talking yuh want advice? Yuh want recommendation?” Well here is a recommendation:

A standard risk assessment framework for operations of children’s home must be immediately established in line with the licensing requirements and clear timelines for compliance must be outlined.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, as we speak, let me tell you the number of homes that are unlicensed. Hear:

Allison Children Home, 51 McDonald Street, not licensed; Bridge of Hope, Smart Village, Sangre Chiquito, not licensed; Chickland Children’s Home, Chickland Village, Upper Carapichaima, not licensed; Mary Care Centre North, 40 Gallus Street, Woodbrook, not licensed, with 14 children; Mary Care Centre South,

that is Fyzabad/Oropouche, not licensed. And it goes on and on and on and on. So right now, as we speak, there are children living in homes that Lord knows what care they are getting. Lord knows. And they come here were a straight face and tell us that the Government has done the list. They come with the list. Well for God's sake licence every institution that deals with children care and protection. You are required to do that by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Do it! Do not talk. "We fed up ah PNM talk. We fed up."

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Charles: And they talk. The other requirement of the Jones report:

An age-appropriate and child-friendly complaints mechanism for children in residential care institutions.

But you see, and I beg your indulgence for one minute. My fear, I am Rodney Charles, the oldest parliamentarian here, 73 years and three months. And my fear is someday I will need elderly home geriatric care and they do not have it in Trinidad and Tobago. What we are seeing in the children's home is replicated in the—

I had a friend from Canada and his children had all the money in the world. They wanted to let him have care in Trinidad and Tobago. They visited every elderly care center in house in Trinidad and Tobago. And they puked. And just we want to be—we talking First World country. "We talking about we want tuh be like Barbados, man. Follow Mia Mottley man. Yuh doh want tuh hear about Mia Mottley. Why yuh think she gets"—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please, please, please.

Mr. R. Charles: Why you think she is on *TIME Magazine* front page? *TIME Magazine*. And let me just tell you, "ah doh like tuh boast" but I got a *TIME Magazine* scholarship. They paid for the entire course of my Master's programme

Failure to Protect Children
Mr. Charles (cont'd)

2022.05.27

at Carleton University, and just as I see it—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Just a second. Just a second.

Mr. Scotland: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(1)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, tie in on our point very quickly. Right? I will give you some leeway. Tie it in very quickly, please.

Mr. R. Charles: I move on. I move on. Even the public has no faith, and we are talking here—let me tie it in, that the Government has no programme or policies to deal with the care and welfare of children. “So ah tying it een.”

The population is saying that they have no faith in the Government. *Trinidad Express*, the big question. Hear the big question 24th May, that was last week 24th May, 2022?

“Do you think any good will come out of the Sabga and Judith Jones report on children’s homes? “

That is the question. Hear some of the responses.

If it was another country, yes, not Trinidad. Not under this PNM.

Another answer:

Nope, it will be swept under the rug again...

Another answer:

Unfortunately, like all reports which cost millions of dollars to investigative, nothing ever comes of it.

Other response:

There is an empty shelf in some Minister’s office where it will fit nicely

The population has lost faith.

Meanwhile, under the watch of this Minister of National—this ineloquent Minister of National Security.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member please. I will prefer that you retract that please.

Mr. R. Charles: I retract it. I retract it. Under the watch of this Minister of National Security, 84 children have died since this Government took office in 2015.

For this year thus far, six children murdered: Zachariah Charles, six years; Christian Liverpool, 10 years; Levi Cudjoe, 12 years; Kevin Kyle Spring, 15 years; Antonio Badenoch, 15 years; Omarie Ramnath, 17 years. Our children are suffering. Eric Williams said that the future of the nation lies in the book bags of our children. This PNM Administration has forgotten the words of wisdom of their founding fathers and they are leaving our children to survive as best they could.

During the pandemic, the Children's Authority reported an increase in the number of children, "children displaying challenging behaviour". The Government has done nothing except come up with a list. During the past two years, nothing but talk.

They appointed Nichola Harvey-Mitchell as Director of the Children's Authority in March 2020, who resigned suddenly, suddenly in December 2021, when all these reports started to come out; nine months after the five boys escaped from the authority's care facility. What were the qualifications? You see, when you talk about appointing people without qualification. A Balisier juice party card is the qualifications to be a director of an institution like this. And no wonder with the report, it is absolute chaos.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6), please and Standing Order 48(5).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member. Right. You are quoting a particular individual and I will prefer you use better terms.

Mr. R. Charles: Okay.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have seen that you are bringing it personal to a particular director or CEO at the authority. I prefer you use better terms please.

Mr. R. Charles: I am guided.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. R. Charles: The Government has failed our troubled and at-risk youth. *Newsday* February 2022—sorry I will go on. I would like to know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how many of our young males, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how many of our young males and females who were physically and sexually abused in unlicensed children’s homes have resorted to a life of crime in their adulthood, because of the trauma they experienced there?

And I am saying: Where is the data? That is what I want them to come. You see, I am First World, and I want data that we could reason together. “But when you come and gih me ah list, yuh lose meh.” How much of the 22million being given to the Children’s Authority, during the mid-year review, will assist in helping children currently experiencing trauma? I could go on and on. They do not care.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes, Member.

Mr. R. Charles: Yes. Police—all the social programmes that create citizens of tomorrow. My grandson is in England and yesterday he was in a thing to bow to the Queen, to acknowledge the Queen. And I am saying they start with the heads of the little children. Patriotism. Where is the equivalent in our education system? Where is the *Students’ Companion* by Wilfred D. Best?

People will meet me as an Opposition MP and say: “Fix the road”. Because this Government has not thought them the responsibilities of a Cabinet Minister, of an Opposition MP or a councillor. They simply do not know, and this Government

Failure to Protect Children
Mr. Charles (cont'd)

2022.05.27

does not care. Right? We have in our home—the budget, \$4million for cadets. Prime Minister Mia Mottley spent a million more with one-fifth of our population.

Mr. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1), please.

Mr. R. Charles: I am talking about children.

Mr. Manning: This is Trinidad and Tobago, not Barbados.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you are winding up now?

Mr. R. Charles: Yes. I am winding up.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right. You have a couple seconds.

Mr. R. Charles: Yes, 126 on Scout Association and \$84,000 on Girl Guides, \$84,000. In the Colonial era, they spent \$100,000. Sixty years after, under this PNM kakistocratic Government, they spent 84,000. I would tell the Coast Guards, the Girl Guides, refuse that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member.

Mr. R. Charles: I will give them more. Naparima, will give them a \$100,000.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. R. Charles: Shame on them!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

4.25 p.m.

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I suspect that it is not unparliamentary to say that it appears as though my friends on the other side have found the most annoying human being in the whole country to have represent us in Naparima here today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, I am trying to keep the debate not personalized, okay? So, could you reword please?

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker I will withdraw it. Just expressing a personal sentiment. The Member for Naparima took the time in his very watery and insignificant contribution in a very important, on a very important matter, to call out the name of the former Director of the Children's Authority, one Nicola Harvey-Mitchell, a young citizen of this country, a young woman who came up from the Laventille community which I proudly represent, who I know to be a very dignified and outstanding human person who assumed the responsibility of director of that organization, who worked tremendously hard in very challenging circumstances, and joined his empty colleagues calling out the citizen's name here today, and identifying that she would have appeared for screening with the PNM. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is precisely people like Nicola Harvey-Mitchell that we seek to represent the people of this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: People who can be so described, not people who do otherwise and then threaten me on the privileges of this House. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the Member for Naparima has a problem with Nicola Harvey-Mitchell being the CEO at one time of the Children's Authority, he has no problem—let me ask him—with the Member for Siparia having been Prime Minister and offers her to this country again, to try to be Prime Minister again? I will choose Nicola Harvey-Mitchell any day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds: The Member for Naparima, now that we have passed that fundament boldly and baldly, and this is no reference to the Member but rather his words, told us that the UNC, the then UNC Government acted and I quote:

Appropriately in respect of the terms of the Sabga report.

A report from 1997, which this country is now very familiar with and it only learnt of this report within the last week and a half or two, eh. Prior to that this country knew precious little about it. I was a parliamentarian in 1997 and I can tell you truthfully, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I knew absolutely nothing about it. And I was on one of the joint select committees that looked into these matters during that time. But as we have already clearly and pellucidly demonstrated, it was handed over in the dead of midnight, around the time when the Member for Naparima is at his best. Nobody knows anything about it.

The trouble with it, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that it did not end there. The terms and the issues that were revealed in that report showed, or at least prima facie, criminality. And the Government of the day who took possession of the report that it commissioned had a moral and ethical and certainly a legal responsibility to treat with those issues and have criminal investigations done. The law is clearer today. It talks about mandatory reporting. It is now a criminal offence if you are aware of the abuse of a child, particularly sexual abuse, and fail to report it. It is called mandatory reporting. And it is surprising to me that the Member for Naparima, the Member for Siparia will pretend, Senior Counsel as that Member is, to not be familiar with this moral and ethical and legal obligation. Hence the reason why the police have been called upon to conduct an investigation not only into those who were alleged to have been involved in criminality in that report, but for those who fail to treat with it in the way that they should.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: And again, I must repeat, on the other hand, the Minister for gender and child affairs in the Office of the Prime Minister told us, persuasively, having received this startling Jones Report, acted quite responsibly by promptly making the terms of it available to the Authority, meaning the Children's

Authority, and asking them to look through it and to make recommendations and come up with a plan in respect of every matter raised by Chairman Jones and her team, who we must commend for good investigative and fact-finding work. When that was had, the Minister then informed the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago, presented it to the Cabinet for Cabinet's directives, and among other things the Cabinet immediately decided that it should be made public.

It was laid here in the Parliament as we know, and it was passed immediately to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service for its attention in respect of criminality.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: And I might tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Princes Town who spoke earlier, who presented this Motion actually, raised issues about the—he called it Child Protection Unit. For those who know better is the Special Victims Department of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. And I just want to say to the Member, that it exists in every single one of the nine divisions across Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and the country. It is led by a superintendent of police. There are two assistant superintendents, 10 inspectors, 18 sergeants, 30 corporals, and 155 constables. It has a secretariat, including 11 BOAs, business operations assistants, and 34 special reserve police officers totalling 261 personnel, all dedicated to working in the protection of the children of Trinidad and Tobago special victims all together.

Mr. President—Mr. Vice-Chairman, sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Special Victims department consists of the Child Protection Unit, the Gender-Based Violence Unit and a Sexual Offences Unit. Sexual offences, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me say very quickly on this very important matter, is a very strange phenomenon of the human animal. That kind of behavior has been with us for as

long as perhaps man exists. Nothing that we are discussing here is altogether new, you know, or unique to Trinidad and Tobago, you know, because you would be surprised to know the places and the people who would be engaged in this kind of behavior of putting our children at risk—the matter that Madam Jones and her team, and Mr. Sabga and her team—his team—had the responsibility to look out for on behalf of all of us. And the officers of these units are cross trained so that they can handle matters across the spectrum, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So I say that and put it on the record only to have the Member for Princes Town stop saying that he knows that they are understaffed and under-resourced, and all of “dem folly”. This is serious business.

The matter in front of us is a very serious one, reflecting the sinful, greedy, selfish, perverted nature of the human animal with all kinds of weird and perverted tastes. And sadly, I am told, having seen it myself, that Trinidad and Tobago is one of the highest consumers of pornographic material in the world, just as how they say KFC on Independence Square earns the most income across the world in the chains. This is real, brings nobody any joy. And it is the law, particularly the criminal law and serious views upon it, and enforcement of it, that will keep people in check. And even with that, you still have problems. Or even in prisons around the world and in homes, where children are supposed to be kept, made and kept safe you have this issue, sometimes at the hands of the very ones who are supposed to be protecting them. And within recent days, as this matter became public, thanks to this Government, for shedding light upon it, so it is now engaging the national attention.

You have heard some of the victims identifying those who they had encountered as children, coming out and saying what their experiences have been. And I want them to know, all of you victims in Trinidad and Tobago, come on up,

come on out, contact the police, contact your Member of Parliament, especially those on this side and we will make sure that you are given a hearing by those who must investigate these things. And once the perpetrators are alive, and the evidence is sufficiently cogent and justiciable as the Prime Minister has asked, action will be taken. I, as Minister of National Security, have conveyed that policy direction to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: So all who—all “anti-slopers” ought to be found out. And I trust you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker what an “anti-sloper” is. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in respect of allocations—just touching on something Princes Town said—when we came to office in 2015, not only did we meet cold legislation, you heard the Member for Naparima and others outline the legislation that they pass. Well you would have heard since then that the legislation was so ineffectual, without regulations, without the institutions to support it, it was like dry bones in the cemetery that Naparima grew up around. Dry bones. It took this Government after 2015 when we came to office, to put flesh on those bones and breathe life into them. And I will show you how in a second.

But, when we came to office in 2015, we immediately by virtue of the nation’s economic circumstances, announced a cut across the board by 7 per cent for everybody. We cut back on expenses because we had to, all across the board, not only in respect of the children’s regime, but across the board. That was the state of affairs in Trinidad and Tobago after years of having it so good and squandering and others stealing public moneys by the millions. We did that. And when we went into the books, we found that the Member for Princes Town spent and the invoice was there to show \$250,000 in roti, and the same Member for Princes Town—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member.

Mr. Lee: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay Members.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay Members, okay Members.

Hon. F. Hinds: That is on public record.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, no Members. The relevance—

Hon. F. Hinds: Yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—with regard to and like with all previous speakers tie it in quickly please.

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you—

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I think the Minister should withdraw that.

Hon. F. Hinds: Withdraw?

Mr. Indarsingh: No records to prove—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh:—as it relates to my colleague spending \$250,000 on roti.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again hold on, one second hon. Member, there is a procedure put the Standing Order before it.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Standing Order?

Mr. Indarsingh: 48 (1).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Standing Order?

Mr. Lee: 48 (1).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right. Again, Member in terms of the thing I would just like you to retract the statement please.

Hon. F. Hinds: Retract what Mr. Deputy Speaker?—that we had records to show that \$250,000 was spent from the Office of the Prime Minister on roti and \$250 million was spent in ministerial travel.

Mr. Lee: No, Mr. Deputy Speaker he is continuing. 48 (1). He is continuing the narrative.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker under 48 (6) he alleged that the MP for Prince Town spent that sum of money and he needs to retract it now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*] [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will move on.

Hon. Members: No.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members please, hon. Member, you are quoting from a particular document. Once you have entered into debate, it becomes your particular discourse, okay. And you are willing to stand by the discourse that you have—
[*Interruption*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in response to you as politely as you have approached me, I am prepared to stand by the fact that from the Office of the Prime Minister, they spent over \$52 million in entertainment, some of which I think \$250,000 was spent on roti.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Listen, Members, I am not going to go into the semantics. So you stand by your statement?

Hon. F. Hinds: I stand by my statement

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Great, proceed.

Hon. F. Hinds: And I am moving on. And coming here today, the Member for Princes Town, to talk about lack of resources, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is what I have the problem with. Mentioned in passing that the—about the Wendy Fitzwilliam hospital. I want to Member for Princes Town and our friends on the other side to know that it is up and running.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: And the Member spoke about Malaysian doctors. Why they did not send the Malaysian doctors to the Couva hospital, which they opened on the 15th of September. The elections were the 20th. Winched, devoid of shame, open, the—supposedly opened the Couva hospital, five days before the general election, closed it down the same day. And it took the incoming Government to activate that hospital in a serious way and it is now serving the people of Trinidad and Tobago. It is a sham. But that is how they do.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Judith Jones report made several recommendations. And it spoke to the question of standardized assessment across the board. And I would like to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because the Member for Naparima raised it in his normal, very flippant manner, and burdensome manner I might add, that there are some homes that are unlicensed. Yes, that is true. But you would have heard from the Minister and Member for D'abadie/O'Meara that notwithstanding these unlicensed facilities exist, they have occupancy, and it would be counterproductive to simply close them down. But, they are being monitored and the authorities at the Children's Authority is working with them trying to get them upgraded to achieve licensed status. That is the reality.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: So that there are in fact a few unlicensed one around but you cannot close them down today, because those who occupy them will be at large

and at risk. So empty. But there are about 33 steps that you must satisfy in order to become fully licensed. And they are actually working through them with those houses to get them there. Some of them, the physical building is inconsistent with a modern and expected requirement and requires serious cash injections. Some of them are private, it is not necessarily State, although the State pays for the occupancy to protect the children they are in. But, licensed or unlicensed, that is not the issue because you can have abuse in a licensed home and you can have abuse in an unlicensed home. The issue is human behavior and how we protect the children against it. That is the real issue.

And in order to achieve that, when we came to office and met this—according to the Member for Naparima, this suite of legislation cold and moribund, offering no protection to anyone so much so that that legislation required the establishment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of children's homes—well residences—community residences. When they left office, they knew that the legislation was just that, inoperable, because the homes were not designed for, built for, the regime was not put in place. So much so that their former attorney general who passed the very law, piloted it, and put it on the law books bareback and threadbare and skimpy as it was. Yes. He then, once the Government changed, to show you how unprincipled they are and continue to be, he then went to the courts of this country, the constitutional court and brought an action against the new Government saying, “Look here you have this law, but you do not have the proper regime to support it”, and brought an action. The court frowned on it. When the facts were made known to the court that you passed the law, and now that you leave office knowing that it was not done, you bring an action against the very State hoping to get money and fame. The court threw it out and poured scorn on that unethical posture made well

known by the United National Congress and encouraged by the Member for Siparia.

Mr. Lee: No, no, no. 48 (4) Deputy Speaker, he is—the Member imputing against the Member of Siparia. That is unfair.

Hon. F. Hinds: You notice you did not say imputing improper motives.

Hon. Member: 48 (6).

Mr. Lee: 48 (6). Sorry. Sorry.

Hon. F. Hinds: You notice he did not say imputing improper motives.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, hold on, hold on Member, hold on. I overrule.

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you very much, and that is why—thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker—he said imputing “blrrrrrr” and he started to grumble.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Move on Member, you move on.

Hon. F. Hinds: He could not say it.

Mr. Lee: Deputy Speaker, 48 (6).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, Members, again, I have ruled. So Laventille West I give you the authority to move on.

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Other than that Members on both sides, there is no need to make additional comments. I will appreciate.

Hon. F. Hinds: So—thank you very much. So we came and we found it necessary to put flesh to the dry bones and to put life, to breathe life in the protection of those children. And we did that in a number of ways.

One of the ways in which we did that is that we had our Attorney General, then the Member for San Fernando West, pilot, pass the Family and Children Division Act, which was so important to this whole platform. Because, this is all about children and among many other things in terms of the establishment and of

the Family and Children Division and all of the things that go with that, this Bill, this Act, sorry, dealt with the question of peer resolution among the youngsters, the court to explain peer resolution.

“The Court may make an order referring a child to the Children Drug Treatment Court process...”

Procedure where the court makes an order for children drug treatment court process. The procedure—the effect of an order in that regard and the children drug treatment court process. Because there are many children in our country who adults sell marijuana and sell cocaine and sell alcohol to their destruction.

I have had reports of children as young as eight and nine years old in this country already smoking marijuana, so that the Attorney General led by this Cabinet, and this Prime Minister, brought this legislation in an attempt to put flesh on the bones and to protect them.

In this law, by way of definition section:

“‘children matter’ includes...

...children charge matter;

...children care matter;

...children drug matter;

...children mental health matter;

...matter which is not a family matter within the meaning of the Act but the primary issue in the matter is the care and protection of a child;”

A matter concerning wardship. A:

“...matter in which the child is required to appear in Court.”

All of these issues were traversed in this very important law, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and this is now in vogue a brand new family division designed to protect children. That is what we did.

And in the debate on that, the Attorney General as he then was pointed out, and I quote:

“What that resulted in, Madam Speaker, was a move away from 62 clauses in the last Bill”—the 2015 Bill—“four Schedules, to move now instead to 63 clauses and five Schedules. But what we did very, very, very importantly...”

Well, he goes on—let me do not read all of that—to amend 18 pieces of legislation. And let me name them for you. We amended in this 18 pieces of legislation:

“Supreme Court of Judicature Act, Chap. 4:01.

Bail (Amdt.) Act, Chap. 4:60.

Summary Courts Act, Chap. 4:20.

Administration of Justice (Deoxyribonucleic Acid) Act, Chap. 5:34.

Legal Aid and Advice Act, Chap. 7:07.

Probation of Offenders Act, Chap. 13:51.

Indictable Offences (Preliminary Enquiry) Act, Chap. 12:01.

Prisons Act.”

“Matrimonial Proceedings and Property Act.

Adoption of Children Act.

Status of Children Act.

Family Proceedings Act.

Children’s Authority.

Children’s Community Residences, Foster Care and Nurseries Act.

Children Act, No. 12 of 2012.

Indictable Offences (Committal Proceedings) Act, No. 14 of 2014”

All of this touching and concerning putting life into the law and upgrading it so that it can genuinely protect our children. Introduced the Children’s Court (Amdt.) Rules, 2022, by way of Legal Notice No. 40 of 2022. The Children Court (Amdt.) (No. 2) Rules 2020, another Legal Notice. We submitted and laid in this House on December the 9th 2020 a Green Paper on a national child policy. All of that you know. In Act 20 of 2020, a Miscellaneous (Amdt.) (No.2) Act; we did that. We brought regulations for the children communities—The Children’s Community Residences (Children Homes) Regulation 2018; Regulations for the Children’s Community Residences (Rehabilitation Centres).

We issued an Order in Legal Notice 47 of 2018 for the child rehabilitation centre. We proclaimed many, many aspects of the law that were unproclaimed and we were then able to proclaim them, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because by then we had put the institutional and administrative and other backbone behind the naked law to give life to it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: So we proclaimed a myriad of sections under the Family and Children Division Act of 2016. And I can list every one of them for you. We implemented Children Court Rules. All of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Real work, not no hypocrisy and bury a report in 1997. We took action and we are taking action on these matters.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: And they are devoid of shame to say anything otherwise. Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member you have two more minutes.

Hon. F. Hinds: How much more?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more.

Hon. F. Hinds: I thank you very much.

4.55 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Government has demonstrated genuine care for the children of this nation, those who are at risk. And when I heard the Member for Naparima talk about how much funding we put for the cadets and all that, up to this morning, I had a youngster, Mr. Deputy Speaker, from the Paramin area who perpetrated—not perpetrated, who performed an act of dignity and honesty—who did not have to run away from Trinidad the day after the elections in 2015, and who was not associated with the back-rooming of the then government—we honoured him this morning and held him up to the nation for his honesty and his dignity and his compassion, where he found thousands of dollars and returned it to its rightful owner.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: And I made the point when I addressed the young man today, I said that there are many people in this country, possibly in this Parliament—let me withdraw that. I withdraw that, eh. There are many people in this country with far more qualification than Ernest Constantine, with far more money than Ernest Constantine, who as dishonest as you could have it—this is why I make the point—it is not money that maketh man, it is manners that maketh man.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: And that is why, as I conclude—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Good note to end on.

Hon. F. Hinds: Thank you very warmly, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Excellent note to end on.

Hon. F. Hinds: We support all that we do to protect the children of Trinidad and

Tobago. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you. Thank you, hon. Member. I recognize the Member for Couva South and Member you have 30 minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I make an intervention in this debate here this evening, in this Motion which has been put on the record in a very precise and clinical manner, as it relates to my colleague, the Member for Princes Town and all of my colleagues who have contributed in this debate—the MP for Naparima and my other colleague, the MP for Tabaquite—in relation to how we see the state of affairs as it relates to the children of Trinidad and Tobago being abandoned by the Government of Prime Minister, Dr. Keith Rowley, over the last seven years.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is important that I seize the opportunity to remind those on the other side, and to put the record straight, set the record straight, because their propaganda has no end and no limit, and that is why it is important to set the record straight. Because the Minister of National Security, the Member for Laventille West, if you listen to him very carefully, you would believe that the report of the Cabinet-appointed task force to review the operation of children's homes and institutions in Trinidad and Tobago of July of 1997, was buried, and they or his colleagues, knew nothing of this particular report. And my colleague, the MP for Princes Town, during his contribution, indicated that the leader of—the now Leader of Government Business and Minister of Housing and Urban Development, then Sen. Camille Robinson-Regis, admitted in 2002 that the Ministry of Social Development had used the said report to form their responses and recommendations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is public record. They cannot run from that. Time is longer than twine and history will be on the side of the United National Congress in this particular debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And it is important to note, it is also important to note, that the current Prime Minister, the MP for Diego Martin North/East and the Minister of Finance, the MP—sorry, the Minister of Finance, the MP for Diego Martin North/East and the current Prime Minister, the MP for Diego Martin West, between 2001 and 2010, they were in the government of Patrick Manning. And between that period of 2001 to 2010, you would believe, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that apparently they lost their voices in terms of the whereabouts of this report. Apparently between that period they developed pip. They had nothing to say. They could not speak and they could not find their voices, and that is why I will tell Trinidad and Tobago be very weary of the hypocrisy that is being perpetrated, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not know, I cast no aspersion, but I do not know if during that period, they lost their love for children, because protection was being focused in a particular direction as it relates to former members of the PNM hierarchy. I do not know, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But it is important to put these things on the record, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And it is important, additionally, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to put on the record, because Prime Minister Dr. Keith Rowley indicated—and I am referring to an article that was written on the 18th of May, 2022, written by one Janelle De Souza of the *Newsday*. And on the Sabga Report, he indicated that, and

I quote:

“I am today publicly calling on the commissioner of police to take immediate steps to find this Sabga report and the evidence of all those who were aware of this frightening situation and take all necessary action against all who have been implicated or with these very shocking revelations...”

But, it is important that, again, I reiterate, because on an interview—and I am responding to the Member for Laventille West—during an interview on i95.5, the chair of this particular report, Mr. Robert Sabga, stressed that the report was not buried and it was not sat on. And it is important, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that during his contribution that is, the Minister of National Security—and we will continue to hear from Members of the Government—you will feel that the Sabga Report is the only report that exists as it relates to this very important issue of child abuse in Trinidad and Tobago. And it is important to make that point, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because during the intervention of the Minister of National Security, he boasted about legislation and what was done to give teeth to the legislation and so on, that they found coming into office.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the UNC did not introduce five Bills after the 1997 Sabga Report, including the Children’s Authority Bill, including the Children (Amdt.) Bill, the adoption of the Children Bill, the Miscellaneous Provisions Children Bill and the Children’s Community Residences, Foster Homes and Nurseries Bill, there would have been nothing to work with in terms of the legislative process. And what they have boasted about, was based on the foundation work that was done by the United National Congress in terms of its care for the children of Trinidad and Tobago and tackling this very serious and critical issue that we continue to speak about, and we will have to continue to speak about it, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But when the Minister boasted about

improving the legislation that they found, and their track record, I feel that the Minister of National Security did not read the report of retired Justice Jones and her committee.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And further to that, apparently he was very flippant and dismissive of the statement that was made by his colleague, the Member for Tobago East and the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister with responsibility for Gender and Child Affairs. Because if you go to the Minister's ministerial statement which was made on the 29th of April, 2022, and I read directly from the *Hansard* under the heading of:

“Under Legislation:

- Legislation guiding the safeguarding, care, and protection of children is confusing and ineffective with respect to enforcement of its provisions and the creation of offences.
- The legislation facilitates a hybrid system of care for children residents in children's homes, children who have the benefit of orders from the court with respect of whom the Children's Authority is mandated to provide care and treatment and children who do not, thereby creating an unequal system of care.”

This is the actual findings of the report, and I am quoting directly from the ministerial statement.

So the Minister of National Security is totally dismissive of the ministerial statement of his colleague, and the Minister has demonstrated his lack of knowledge in terms of what he has presented here this evening, because he has not read the report and that reeks of incompetence on the part of the Minister of

National Security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And to come to make a contribution an intervention to this particular debate without reading the report, it sends a very clear message.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: It sends a very clear message, Mr. Deputy Speaker, how the Government Ministers are treating this very serious issue, and Trinidad and Tobago is looking on.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Trinidad and Tobago is looking on, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And that is why we continue to tell this country that you cannot trust a government who does not understand their role and responsibility in terms of fulfilling that responsibility of governing Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, the Minister of National Security wanted to chastise my colleague, the Member of Parliament for Princes Town, as he indicated that the Member was making heavy weather and dance and he did not want to hear about the understaffing of the Children's Authority and so on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and this was something that was, from his point of view—that is the Minister of National Security—that was something trivial that was being raised by my colleague.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to just go into the very said ministerial statement that the Member for Tobago East presented in this very House, as I said, on the 29th of April, 2022 and, again, in the Minister's ministerial statement, there was a broad heading: "Under Child Protection System" and it went on to read, and I quote from her statement:

- “• The Children’s Authority is not adequately or efficiently fulfilling its statutory mandate.
- The most critical risk facing the Authority is that it is not structured and staffed to deliver the mandate outlined in the legislation.”

And, again, the recommendations of the Judith Jones Report address the very critical issue of the staffing of the Children’s Authority. And how could a Minister of National Security, who is a senior Cabinet Minister, come and make an intervention in this debate to tell Trinidad and Tobago that the staffing level issue raised by my colleague, the Member for Princes Town, has no relevance or importance in this debate. It shows again that this Government is dismissive of the very critical issue, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And that is why it is important for us to call out the Government in relation to this particular issue. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I said, every one of them, when they contribute to this particular debate, will want you to believe that there is not a Justice Judith Jones Report existing, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And why? Why they do not want that to come out into the public domain? I thought the Prime Minister who has the responsibility of governing Trinidad and Tobago for all, would have told the Commissioner of Police too, just as he had the strength and the character and the bravado to tell the acting Commissioner of Police, “find every one as it relates to the Sabga Report”, the Prime Minister should have had the equal bravado and gusto to focus the Commissioner of Police as it relates to the Justice Jones Report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Is it that the Prime Minister is a coward as it relates to this—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Scotland: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I stand under Standing Orders 48(4), 48(5) and 48(1) and also 48(6).

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, hon. Member, again, you used some adjectives there that I would prefer you not. I would like you to withdraw it.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Thank you very much. I withdraw. The Prime Minister must display the character and the strength, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—to point the police in the direction too of the Justice Judith Jones Report.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And it is what probably—it is what cocoa that is existing under the sun, probably that he does not have the character and the strength as it relates to this particular Judith Jones Report, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Because, you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have not heard—they will hide. The Members of the Government will hide behind and come and tell us that a task force will develop an action plan out of the report, and an additional \$126 million is needed for implementation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is at stake here, is that the report found that it is an indictment of not only managers and employees of the home, but of the entire chain of command for the protection and care of children, starting with those responsible for proclaiming the legislation and so on, which they boasted about in terms of they did it and so on, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and resourcing the homes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know the Leader of Government Business—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members—hold on, hold on. Each Member who has not spoken as yet, will have the opportunity. Right? That is one thing that you all are assured of. Right? Once time permits, each Member will have the opportunity,

please.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know the Leader of Government Business may want to get into the debate, but also the Member will have to defend her track record also.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: And, as I said, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: You did not read the report properly.

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—the important issue here is that also, the Minister of National Security attempted to, in his usual style, chastise my colleague, the MP for Naparima, as it relates to his contribution and said that the MP was attacking the individual by the name of who occupied the position of the Director of the Children's Authority, at that time, one Nichola Harvey-Mitchell.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. So hon. Member, that name came up already. It has been dealt, and I would prefer that you do not go there, please. Move onto a different point.

Mr. R. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in terms of what I am attempting to do, has nothing to do with the individual. My colleague, the MP for Naparima, was dealing with the person who held the position, and I am of the opinion and the Opposition is of the opinion that the country has to hear about this Justice Judith Jones Report. Because we are of the opinion that the Children's Authority, after years of ignoring reports of abuse, the Authority was jolted into action on the 29th of March, 2021, when two 15 year-olds from the Valsayn Child Support Centre, Antonio Francois and Simeon Daniel, they were shot and killed on a rooftop in Laventille. We must never forget—along with three other boys, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that they had run away from the centre a week before. Four of them had been placed there by the court on their mothers' request for help in dealing with

them. And little did they know how they would end at a child support centre run by the Children's Authority, the country's core institution for the protection and welfare of children, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is important for Trinidad and Tobago to know that the Children's Authority, not the individual, the Children's Authority was never fully on the job and on top of its responsibilities.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

There were findings of physical and sexual abuse, poor and inadequate staffing and substandard quality of care to children at these homes. And this vital institution, the Children's Authority, became a lost hope under the PNM Government of Dr. Keith Rowley and his entire Cabinet, Mr. Deputy Speaker—Madam Speaker, sorry. And, Madam Speaker it is important that I think, I think, I could only conclude that the Government does not want the country to hear that on page 57 of this report, that it is alleged—and I am going by an article that was written by Dr. Sheila Rampersad on the 1st of May, “Houses of Horror”, that the Prime Minister as the head of the National Security Council, he does not want—the Prime Minister does not want the country to hear that:

“Alleged gang leader Anthon ‘Bombay’ Boney, now deceased, was contacted on behalf of former Children's Authority...in the search for five boys who absconded from the Authority's care facility...”

And I am sure—and the Minister of National Security, during his contribution, should have told Trinidad and Tobago whether the Children's Authority head, at that time, had no faith in the police service as it relates to finding these boys and had to resort to gang leaders and so on, Madam Speaker. And that shows the relationship, because my colleague indicated of the PNM bearings that the then officeholder had in terms seeking the party's nomination to contest the Port of

Spain South Constituency, Mr. Deputy Speaker—Madam Speaker, sorry.

Madam Speaker, I thought too, during his contribution—and that is the Minister of National Security—that we would have been regaled or others on the Government side, during their contribution and input into this particular debate here this afternoon, would have found the time to make an intervention and tell us, Madam Speaker, how are they going to deal with the issue of enforcing the licensing and monitoring requirement for children's homes and whether they would be—that is the Government—championing an independently public funded children's commissioner which the report has advocated for in terms of dealing with this scourge of child abuse.

Madam Speaker, and also based on the seriousness of this issue facing all the children of this country and Trinidad and Tobago, the Government should have been telling us, during their respective contributions, whether they will pursue the establishment of an interagency task force which should be established under the Office of the Prime Minister to coordinate the national system in terms of integrating operations across state agencies and Ministries for the effective and timely delivery of care and protection of the children of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, and whether the task force should include representatives from the Ministries of Health and Education.

And what the Minister of National Security, the Member for Laventille West, should have told this debate is that he looked at the recommendations of the Justice Judith Jones Report, as it relates to the recommendation of the Children's Authority, should have internal security force trained to deal with children in residential care and the security function should also be extended to private children's homes. That is the Minister's remit.

5.25 p.m.

And the Minister should be first and foremost wanting to address this particular issue. And whilst I know they will hide behind that the task force is dealing with it, show your leadership. Display your leadership and tell the country, Madam Speaker, that as Minister of National Security, “There is an issue of security and I will be championing it in terms of—whilst I will not directly interfere, I will use my responsibility to build on the recommendation and carry it out for the benefit of the children of Trinidad and Tobago.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Indarsingh: But then what could you expect from a Minister who will tell you his job is not to make the people of Trinidad and Tobago feel safe. Well, if the adults cannot feel safe under the Minister and the Member for Laventille West, well, you know what will be for the children of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, this is a very serious issue. This is a very critical issue and this Opposition, led by the Member for Siparia, has always been concerned. We are always concerned about the welfare and well-being of the children of Trinidad and Tobago, and this was clearly exemplified during the Member for Siparia’s tenure as the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago. I could spend a next hour standing here about her government’s achievements as it relates to the welfare and well-being of the children of this country from an educational point of view, from a social services point of view, from a health point of view, and her overall wanting to see a better Trinidad and Tobago because we believe that the future of Trinidad and Tobago will always be developed in terms of that sense of focus you put into the well-being of our children in terms of their nurturing during their developmental years. And I am yet to see that coming from this Government, led by a Prime Minister who has direct responsibility of the Ministry of Gender and

Failure to Protect Children
Mr. Indarsingh (cont'd)

2022.05.27

Child Affairs and the Children's Authority being directly under his portfolio, a board appointed by the Cabinet that the Prime Minister has led for the last seven years—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Mr. R. Indarsingh:—and that is why I say, they have no care for the children.

Madam Speaker: Member, your speaking time is now spent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Diego Martin Central.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Symon de Nobriga): Thank you. Thank you, Madam Speaker, and thank you for the opportunity to join this debate for a short contribution. Madam Speaker, it is almost always a pleasure to join a debate in this House in progress to speak on behalf of the residents of Diego Martin Central and to add my voice to matters of national concern. Today really should be one of those occasions where I feel the joy and honour to stand before you, the Members of this House and the citizens watching and listening to us on all the various platforms that the Parliament Channel is broadcast on, not only now but with the ability to do so at any time in the future. Truthfully, Madam Speaker, today is not one of those days, because the Motion that is before us really should have the potential to positively impact those who are most vulnerable in our society and those whom we are charged to protect. But, Madam Speaker, having sat here and listened to the contributions of the Members opposite, I am of the opinion that this Motion is no more than a sham and a publicity stunt designed to continue the narrative that the Opposition has been carrying, on wherever they can carry it over the last few weeks.

Having seen their attempts to drag this Government by referring to a report

commissioned by their own party while they were in Government, wrongly condemned by the general population, one would have thought that they would have thought better of it and simply shrunk back into their corners. But we know that is not the nature of this Opposition. And yet again and true to form, what they have done is double down again. They have come, even in the face of public outrage, to try and rewrite both the very recent and the distant past. Madam Speaker, I had to sit here to hear the Member for Naparima come to talk with this circular argument, followed by the Member for Couva North and other Members, I want to believe, but I know for sure the two of them, talking about the findings of the report as if we do not already know the findings of the report.

The findings of the report are the work of the task force that was set up by the Government and the work of that task force now forms the body that has the body of work that would be their action plan. But, you see, the circular argument requires them to talk and to belittle the work of the committee set up to put that action plan together, because in doing that they will no longer have a light shining on their own inaction. Madam Speaker, this Government has put together the work that is required for this report to be actioned.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: At the end of the day if it is that the Members opposite have a problem with a report being actioned in a systematic way, five months, then what have they to say for themselves?—because the problem is that this report does not sit by itself. This report does not sit in a space and a place in time where that is the only thing that exists.

You see, I would have been less appalled today if the mover of the Motion, the Member for Princes Town, that started his contribution by apologizing to the House for the inaccuracy that he peddled in an earlier sitting, not only to you,

Madam Speaker, not only to the Members of the House present, not only to the viewing and listening public across all the different platforms on which the Parliament Channel is broadcast, not only those people who would have seen it live, but also those people who will see it at any time in the future or hear it at any time in future, any of them who would have heard the misfortune—who would have had the misfortune of hearing the purposefully uttered untruth that the 1997 report of the Sabga task force was laid in this House.

Madam Speaker, I say “purposefully uttered untruth” because parliamentary etiquette prevents me from calling it, “a lie designed to mislead the population.”

Madam Speaker: Well, Member, so you know that so I will ask you to withdraw that word, and you dealt with it nicely otherwise. Okay?

Hon. S. de Nobriga: My apologies, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: So withdraw that word and please continue.

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, such an inaccuracy which could have been easily—

Madam Speaker: It is withdrawn, “eh”?

Hon. S. de Nobriga: It is withdrawn, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Hon. S. de Nobriga: My apologies. It is withdrawn. Such an inaccuracy which could have easily been prevented had the Member sought the counsel of the Clerk of the House, ought not to stand on the books nor the Member be absolved from the responsibility to simply speak the truth. You see, Madam Speaker, I was raised with a value system that says, “Only those without sin should cast stones”, and the Member was at the time trying to absolve his party from their own sins—from their own sin of their inaction in 1997 while in Government in order to be able to come here today and engage with his colleagues in further misdirection and public

misinformation, couched in the wording of this Motion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: But you see, Madam Speaker, neither he nor his party can escape the sins of their past and in this particular matter they are empty-handed and most definitely without stones.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, we sit here with a stark reality before us and that is, that as a society we must confront, we must own up to, we must collectively seek to find answers. And I dare say, Madam Speaker, that no amount of finger pointing and no amount of deflecting is going to provide the absolution so desperately sought by those who would prefer to bury their heads in the sand.

Madam Speaker, in preparing for today's debate, I found it near impossible to divorce myself from the emotion of this Motion, and to be very honest, I am finding that particularly difficult even now. I found it particularly difficult to focus on the reality of the work that this Government is doing, the work that this Government has done to improve the lives of, to create opportunities for and to protect the children of this country. But luckily, my colleague, the Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister, under whose charge the portfolio of Gender and Child Affairs lies, did an exceptional job in outlining the work of the Ministry she leads, the work that she is currently engaged in and will be engaged in as they seek to fulfill their mandate, particularly when it comes to the interest of the nation's children. But, Madam Speaker, it is only in that struggle to divorce myself from the emotion of this Motion that I truly understood the nature of the Motion. You see, the Motion only pretends to be focused on data or facts, and we hear it; we have heard it in the contributions from those opposite. It has been nothing but blame game, name calling, and you sprinkle the requirement for data just to keep in line

with the actual Motion.

This Motion is really focused on persisting with the Opposition's false narrative that this is an uncaring Government, that is it not concerned in this case with the protecting of its youngest and most vulnerable citizens. Madam Speaker, nothing could be further from the truth. The Minister in her reply has demonstrated that and so have the Members for D'Abadie/O'Meara and Laventille West, who in speaking about the work of the Ministries of Education and National Security, they have discussed where they are engaged and where they are also doing their part to protect the children of this country. But you see, Madam Speaker, I also find myself having to look at this Motion again and the contributions of those opposite through the lens of my own portfolio, and, in doing so, I see a Motion absolutely packed with well-established tools of propaganda and misinformation techniques and we as a Parliament and as a nation must be aware of this and understand what they are attempting to do, especially in the light of the fact that we know how well trained they are in the use of propaganda and misinformation techniques.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker—Madam Speaker, 48(1), the Minister—I am trying to follow the Minister for the last 10 minutes, Madam Speaker, he has not gotten into the Motion.

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, I move directly—

Madam Speaker: Okay, so I rule, please proceed then.

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the first technique in the crafting of this Motion is a technique well established is that of appealing to emotion. The use of loaded language designed to incite fear in the population and gain support for the Opposition by creating a sort of “us against them” narrative. Madam Speaker, it should be noted and it is also a technique

called, “bandwagon”.

Madam Speaker, the other technique is the use of intentional vagueness and obfuscation and it is instructive that the Member for Naparima littered obfuscation through his contribution, and in many ways I sat here thinking, this must be some sort of Freudian slip. You see, he knows the intentional—

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Thank you, Madam Speaker, and I am guided. You see, in using language that is both intentionally broad and vague, the Opposition can continue to shift the goalpost, as they have done continually in this particular campaign over the last few weeks. And as they have found each tact they have taken simply cut off by the presentation of facts that have dismissed their accusations.

Madam Speaker, another technique that has been applied today—not only today—

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, with all respect, 48(1), this is not Communication 101, Madam Speaker, I ask for a ruling.

Madam Speaker: Overruled. Please proceed.

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, another technique—I understand the need, you know—I understand the need but the nation must understand what is being portrayed as an Opposition in this House. Madam Speaker, another technique being applied by those opposite, not only today but in the run up to this latest salvo in their management of the fallout of the Robert Sabga task force report, is something that is called “card stacking”, and this is the manipulation of information in order to make something look worse than it is by downplaying the positives and stressing the negatives.

Madam Speaker, over simplification is yet another misinformation technique

that was used by the mover of the Motion in the body of the Motion itself, as well as in his so-called solutions. You see, generalities are often used to provide simple yet unworkable answers to complex social and political problems. Madam Speaker, the problem of child abuse and neglect, of child abandonment, and the real challenges faced by the State to match the supply of safe spaces with the demand for those spaces has been with us for a long time. It was with us in 1997 when the Opposition Leader was part of the Government that commissioned the Robert Sabga task force, and of course what they did with it is another story but that is what they are trying to manage today.

Madam Speaker, we still live in a Trinidad and Tobago that in many cases is unable to distinguish between discipline and punishment. We still live in a Trinidad and Tobago where people boast about how much licks they received when they were young, with the instruments they get the licks with and how well, in spite of that, they still turned out, and, Madam Speaker, the truth is we still live in a Trinidad and Tobago that has normalized that dysfunction. With that in mind, Madam Speaker, we could build, we could fund, we could start 100 children authorities, unless there is a culture change in the way that we as a collective treat with children and the rights of children, unless we determine that there is a line to be drawn between discipline and punishment, unless we believe that children in residential care facilities or trauma-informed environments have rights too, nothing is going to change because we will not be dealing with the problem at the source.

Madam Speaker, the Children's Authority is less than 10 years old and what we are doing as a country is asking it to change a culture that has existed for more than 10 decades; certainly we need to demand more from it. Certainly we have to, but in our search for perfection in their performance, are we also trying to assuage our own consciences and shifting the blame from our inactions as parents and

communities. You see, Madam Speaker, the village only stopped raising the children when the villagers complained about the village raising the children. We are here today, Madam Speaker, as a citizen, as a Member of this House and more so as a father; I genuinely wish I could have been like the Member for Tabaquite and applaud the Member for Princes Town, who is also a father, for bringing this matter to the Parliament floor to engage us in a meaningful conversation focused on the children of this country, giving genuine input into how we can be better and do better because that is what a responsible Opposition should do. But, unfortunately, he and they have squandered the opportunity to add value to the national conversation by focusing instead on name calling and a finger-pointing exercise.

Madam Speaker, as a parent I am certain he is genuinely concerned with the kind of society—

Madam Speaker: The hon Member or the Member for whatever—

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Sorry. Sorry, Madam. Madam Speaker, as a parent the Member for Princes Town must be genuinely concerned with the kind of society in which his offspring will grow, but, Madam Speaker, if I may be so bold as to offer the Member some advice, this finger-pointing exercise in which he and his colleagues are currently engaged will not make Trinidad and Tobago a better place for his daughter or for my daughter or for my son, or for any of the children of the Members here. The blame game in which he and they are currently revelling in will not make the prevailing culture disappear or change the facts as they are and he and they should really desist. Madam Speaker, I know only too well the real challenges of parenting, and I probably will not get any awards for being the world's best father, nor should I, but I know what I want for my children. I want what is best for them and I want what is best for all the children of Trinidad and

Failure to Protect Children
Hon. S. de Nobriga (cont'd)

2022.05.27

Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. de Nobriga:—to provide an environment within the home where they can be nurtured, where they can express themselves, where they can be raised with the values of honesty and integrity, respect for themselves and others, and as a Roman Catholic, with a love for God.

Madam Speaker, it is precisely because I cherish those values and because I know that on each occasion I rise to speak in Parliament, there is the odd chance that a child, possibly my child, might be watching. Today that possibility became a reality when we were visited, I believe, by the students of St. Gabriel's who were exemplary in their attention and their behaviour.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: It is because I cherish the awesome responsibility I have to them that when I choose to stand, I stand on a base built on fact and not on fiction. Madam Speaker, but what are the facts? And in pursuit of that I would simply want to compare the responses of two administrations to reports of child abuse and neglect so that we can more accurately determine where truth lies.

In January, 1997, the then Prime Minister and head of the Cabinet, the hon. Basdeo Panday, appointed a task force led by one, Robert Sabga, who, among other things, had to review the operations of children's homes and institutions in Trinidad and Tobago. Fact. The first meeting of the task force took place on February 04, 1997, and the report of the task force is dated July 1997. Fact. Madam Speaker, the first references—and if I am incorrect in these dates, I would ask the Leader of the Opposition to please correct me, as she is the only sitting Member of the House who was present in the Cabinet then. But the first reference is—to this July 1997, report, appeared in a Cabinet Minute dated March 12, 1998. Fact.

Madam Speaker, I want that to sink in and therefore I will say it again, the first references to the July 1997, report is in a Cabinet Minute dated March 12, 1998, a full eight months after. I am sitting here, hearing the Members opposite cry to heaven on earth about five months to get us from a report to an action item with— Madam Speaker, I “does geh work up” inside here, you know, and my apologies for that.

The mover of this Motion and his colleagues have been all over the media accusing this Government of sitting on the Judith Jones report for five months before it was laid in the Parliament. Madam Speaker, it took them eight months from the time they received the report to a Cabinet Note being written—eight months. That Cabinet Minute, Madam Speaker, No. 587, dated March 12, 1998, did two things. It requested comments from the Attorney General at the time and the Minister of National Security at the time, but it also referred for the consideration of the Minister of Public Administration, the role of the Statutory Authorities Service Commission and its authority to terminate the services of pensionable staff in instances of obvious malpractice, vis-à-vis the cultural—the control exercise by denominational boards of state-assisted institutions. Fact.

Madam Speaker, through you, while I cannot ask the mover of the Motion if he is aware of the contents of their responses, or if they ever responded to that instruction from the Cabinet. I can certainly ask the Member for Siparia who then held the position of the Minister of Legal Affairs. I will ask, Madam Speaker, it appears that there was no response since Cabinet Minute No. 787, dated April 02, 1998, and I am quoting here:

Agreed that the Attorney General and Minister of National Security submit for its considerations their comments on the legal issues raised in the report. So, nine months after Robert Sabga, who by that time was then safely ensconced in

the high commissioner's residence in Canada, submitted his report. The Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago of which the hon. Opposition Leader was an integral part was yet to hear from the Attorney General and the Minister of National Security. Madam Speaker, I respectfully submit that not just eight months but 25 years later this country is still waiting to hear from anyone who was then tasked with caring for and protecting the children of this nation, and I have to sit here and listen to the hypocrisy of those opposite, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, I am appalled as a parent, and yet the Member for Princes Town and the Member for Tabaquite come to this House to reprimand this Government for its failure to effectively protect and support our nation's children. The Member for Tabaquite followed up by saying the Judith Jones report points out decades of abuse in these homes, accused the Government of a dereliction of duty of care to our children; postulated that data collection would ensure that many problems, particularly those associated with children on the spectrum would be eradicated and accuses us of living in a dystopian reality.

Madam Speaker, I want to ask the Member which version of reality she lives in where the Sabga report was not suppressed and where as a result subsequent decades of continued abuse were not visited upon those we are supposed to protect? In which dystopian reality is this not a stain on this nation and on them as individuals and where are we as a nation and are we not now reaping the rewards of their inaction?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. de Nobriga: Madam Speaker, as a father and a citizen, I too was appalled by the contents of the Judith Jones report, and even more so by the Robert Sabga report. I wish to urge my colleagues opposite and the national community to see

the difference in the approaches adopted by the UNC and by the PNM.

We believe—I believe that this time we can get it right, or as close to as to right as possible, but this will only happen when we join hands, even across the aisle and work on this together. But in order to do that the Members opposite must stop engaging in misdirection, in misinformation and circular arguments meant only to advance a political agenda and narrative. They must also take ownership of the sins of their past and heed the call of the Prime Minister and finally—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. S. de Nobriga:—work with the police to bring those responsible for the horrors visited on the children of this nation under their watch, to bring them to justice and to bring some form of closure to their families. Madam Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.55 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Dr. Rai Ragbir (*Cumuto/Manzanilla*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. I am happy to join this debate in this august Chamber to speak on behalf of the people of Cumuto/Manzanilla and Trinidad and Tobago in full support of this Motion brought by my colleague, the Member for Princes Town.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Madam Speaker, I speak directly to the Preamble that states:

Whereas the State has a duty of care to protect all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago especially the children to which their policies have not been effective on safety, security, health and education.

Part of the most enjoyable instances in my career as a medical practitioner is treating with children, assisting children and helping children. Today, I get to do it

at a larger scale as a Member of Parliament, and what a tribute. But as a medical doctor, it is a heartwarming part of the job. But, in saying that, Madam Speaker, I have seen so many instances when the vulnerable children in our nation have been abandoned. I have seen so many instances where the children have been denied proper health care due to inefficient systems that exist. Some have even been denied medical attention in appropriate timing, some who have been abused, some have been malnourished.

I just want to go back to my good friend, the hon. Member for D'Abadie/O'Meara, who was talking about social workers. There is definitely a shortage of social workers, and that is something that needs to be seen at the schools. We saw the start of Term III a plethora of school violence in the social media. Now, you may not see a lot of it, but the absence of it must not be a yardstick to indicate that there is no school violence.

Madam Speaker, in my constituency of Cumuto/Manzanilla, and I dare say a lot of rural communities, there are a lot of school dropouts, and as a result of that there will be negative behaviour and attitudes towards other children, and criminal activities may ensue from that. Today I stand on the floor of this Parliament, and I say enough is enough.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: Today, I hope that this Government listens to this Motion, not with political intent, but with patriotic commitment to understand that we are saying here today, can, will and we must save the lives of our children, both sides. Yes, I agree, we need to work together so that we can save our children.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: So the first issue I put on the table is more needs to be done for health care in our children. But what is that? You see the State might see that the

hospitals that are built there, but I remember clearly Kamla Persad-Bissessar who built the Children's hospital, and there was a reason for that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: But what we need is a health care system specialized for children, and before the Government stands up on relevance, let me repeat the Preamble I am referring to the children's hospital, which could have been used, saved the tax dollars and more things like that—because I know my time is running out.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: I am saying that the policies of this Government in health care has not uncovered, has not been robust enough to help with children of abuse. Ask yourself, do we have properly trained nurses, doctors, technicians and other people to identify and indicate persons who have been abused coming in for treatment? As first responders, do we have the mechanisms in the hospitals with special children units that would help a parent or family member who brings a victim of abuse, in confidentiality, because you mentioned about data, from the perpetrator, to get the help, Madam Speaker?

Let us understand, in many case of abuse it is one parent or family member doing it, and the other parent is fearful for their own life and may not be able to go to the police station. So we need to set up systems at hospitals and district health facilities so that they can get assistance, especially in the rural communities.

At the hospitals we do have a mental support for a parent, but who will be bringing such victims to help them? We need to be strong enough to report a crime. One of the things we can do in primary health care and other education systems is to educate everyone around. We must get accurate data so that we can follow up and be due diligent in our follow-up. Our hospitals simply cannot be the plaster for the wound, offering a cover for the injury. It must help cure the injury of

an abuse.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Ragbir: I use the word of “abuse”, and we have been seeing that so many times, but many people do not understand that word, and it connotates several meanings. As a medical doctor, I see many patients that have been abused, both on the pediatric side, the children side, and adults. It has been standardized. There are basically four types of child abuse, and very briefly, one, physical abuse, two, sexual, three, emotional, fourth neglect. Madam Speaker, I will deal with each of these, because we need to put it in context. [*Cell phone rings*]

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Wait. Is that a device?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Okay. Will the Member with the offending device please leave the Chamber and get their device under control.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*] [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Speaker: Swiftly please so that we can proceed with our business. Leader of the House.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday the 3rd day of June at 1.30p.m.

At that time, we will deal with item No. 6 on the current Order Paper, which is the Bill, an Act to amend the Immigration (Caribbean Skilled Nationals) Act, Chap.18:03.

GREETINGS

UNREVISED

Greetings Indian Arrival Day
 Hon. F. Al-Rawi (cont'd)

2022.05.27

Indian Arrival Day

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, on Monday, May 30, 2022, the nation commemorates Indian Arrival Day as a public holiday. Therefore, before I put the question on the adjournment of the House, I will now invite Members to express their greetings. Member for San Fernando West.

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Madam Speaker, under five minutes I can stay here?

Madam Speaker: Well, once it is under five minutes you can speak from your desk.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I rise to bring greetings to the people of Trinidad and Tobago on the occasion of Indian Arrival Day. On the 30th of May, 1845, a vessel arrived into Port of Spain called the *Fath-Al-Razak*, which literally means—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. A.-Rawi:—which literally means— *Fath* means the opening by a key. “Al Razak” is the provider, a name of God, one of the 99 names of God. This vessel was named by a merchant out of India, out of Bombay itself, and this vessel was the originating vessel which took 90 days to cross the *kala pani*, which was the “death water”.

Coming from India to Trinidad and Tobago, passing the cape, hitting freezing winds, some 200-plus souls—I believe it is 224 souls, reached to Trinidad and Tobago, five persons having died. Two children on that vessel, one age five, one age four.

According to Dr. Harracksingh, we saw the first person who disembarked by the name of “Bharat” recorded. Of course, “Bharat” is in reference to India, which is the Bharat itself, and we had, therefore, the very humble beginnings in 1845 of

what became a society that would eventually become a mixed and arranged society, where the people of our respective cultures, forced together in slavery originally, in indentureship secondly, by colonization in its original form, where we as sons and daughters from different parts of the world, found ourselves via our ancestors here toiling together.

It is that journey of toiling together, it is that journey of working the fields of this land together, it is that journey of aspiration, of rising to challenge colonial power together, of reaching and crushing the barriers that held us back from education together, of passing the Industrial Stabilisation Act together, of passing the Education Act together, of watching the birth of our society grow, Madam Speaker, that we as a Parliament, and here now on behalf of the Government, celebrate the part of the journey that our Indian brothers and sisters brought in their toil and labour so valiantly to create that which is Trinidad and Tobago.

I as a child of two races, half Indian/half Arab, have had the pleasure of witnessing multiple cultures at work, and I can say, having grown up in San Fernando, having gone to school at Grant Memorial Presbyterian School and at Presentation College, where all of us as brothers and sisters saw no difference amongst us, that Trinidad and Tobago today celebrates the best of what each of us brings to the situation.

On behalf of the Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, we say that that journey that the *Fath-Al-Razak* made to Trinidad and Tobago is a journey that we celebrate today. It is as strong and as powerful as the journey that our African brothers and sisters, Chinese brothers and sisters, Middle Eastern brothers and sisters and European brothers and sisters made, we celebrate our collective culture and we say happy Indian Arrival Day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche West.

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (Oropouche West): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Hon. colleagues, it is my honour and privilege to bring greetings from the Opposition on the occasion of the 177th anniversary of Indian Arrival Day in Trinidad and Tobago.

The East Indian indentures suffered greatly at the hands of the colonials, and struggled to be treated fairly post-independence. Yet, given the chance, their children grew and shone brightly. From the cane fields and the so-called cow shed schools came brilliant leaders in every sphere of professional endeavour, including law, medicine, culture and the arts, commerce, politics and so much more.

Today, we see a distinctly East Indian influence in our food, fashion, entertainment, language, customs and traditions. There are aspects of East Indian presence in Trinidad and Tobago that we all enjoy as proud Trinbagonians, and while we celebrate the good that came from the arrival of the East Indians, we must also remember and learn from the hellish reality of the experiences that they had on the estates.

Renowned historian Prof. Bridget Brereton wrote and I quote:

“The system of indentured immigration, which, though less violent than enslavement, was nevertheless a harsh system of forced labour.”

Now that we are an independent Republic, responsible for the governance of our own affairs, we as legislators especially must ensure that our labour force is treated with the dignity, equality and respect that our ancestors, both slaves and indentured were denied by the colonial masters.

Given our shared historical path, it is especially incumbent upon us to not assume the vile qualities of plantation masters and, in this regard, we must ensure that those who labour know:

1. That their work has value and they can be assured of fair compensation.
2. The conditions under which they labour are safe and if, God forbid, they are injured or killed while on the job, transparent processes would be engaged to justly respond to such tragedies.
3. Their concerns will be met with serious consideration, and their responses their employers would be courteous and prompt.

Madam Speaker, some of the most oppressive practices of the indentureship system were visited especially upon women and children. From physical and sexual abuse, lack of health care, social inequalities, to a gender biased wage system. If we are to truly honour our ancestors, we must do our utmost to banish the inhumanity of the past to the dark halls of history, and work together to eradicate such abuses wherever and whenever they occur.

The legacy of East Indian arrival is, indeed, a celebration of a rich and exquisite culture, but it must be tempered with solemn, introspective tribute to the struggle, sacrifice and survival of the bearers of that culture. We may have come a long way, but there is still much more work to do in learning to respect each other and treat each other equally, no matter our culture, creed, religion, ethnicity or geographic location.

Over these past 177 years, citizens of East Indian descent have contributed considerably to the growth and development of this country with our blood, sweat and tears, and continue to do so as we honour our ancestors, without whose sacrifice none of us would be here.

We vow to continue to honour their legacy, as we teach all the children in our beloved country the rich culture that was brought here, and which evolved into new expressions, assimilating into what is uniquely Trinbagonian and a new reality, from the Tassa to the doubles, from the chutney music to even some of the

Greetings Indian Arrival Day
Mr. Tancoo (cont'd)

2022.05.27

names of our streets and villages.

Madam Speaker, I am very proud of my Indian ancestry. I am exceptionally proud of my Indian ancestry, and even more proud of my Trinbagonian identity.

On behalf of the hon. Leader of the Opposition and all my colleagues on the Opposition Bench, and on behalf of my brothers and sisters of the United National Congress, I take this opportunity to extend the very best wishes for a happy Indian Arrival Day, to all the people of our beloved Trinidad and Tobago, and I pray that God may continue to bless our nation. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, it is my honour to join with you in conveying Indian Arrival Day greetings to nationals of our Indo-Trinbagonian community.

Indian Arrival Day became an official holiday in 1994. It recognizes the impact and the legacy of the 140,000-plus Indian immigrants who came to our shores between 1845 and 1917.

Despite the hardship and struggles that indentured labourers endured, the stories of triumph over adversity and successes are manifest in our society from captains of industry to politicians, Prime Ministers, Presidents, musicians, educators, entrepreneurs and other professionals. In every sector, in every facet of our society.

The fortitude of those cherished ancestors is reminiscent of the words of Sir Isaac Newton who stated, and I quote:

We are who we are because of the hard work of the people who came before us.

Indeed, the diverse mix of this Chamber is a testament to those words.

On a cultural note, the music of Mungal Patasar is well known. In addition, the genre of soca would not be if its founder, Ras Shorty I, had not experienced the

Greetings Indian Arrival Day
Madam Speaker (cont'd)

2022.05.27

rhythms of India through its people and their generational links. The music and the legacy of chutney soca would not have been if not for Sundar Popo and the linguistic elements of Hindustani and Bhojpuri dialects.

One can justifiably assert that the national religious identities have also been heavily influenced by migration and ancestral links. East Indian spices and delicacies are not only widely enjoyed, but akin to missables in our local gastronomic fare.

The Indo-Trinbagonian community and influence continue to weave and be a part of our national fabric, and for this very distinction there is much to delighted, appreciated and celebrated. Let us, therefore, honour the sacrificial foundations laid by the ancestors of the East Indian community, as we engage in our celebrations this year.

On behalf of the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, my family and on my own behalf, I take this opportunity to wish all Members and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago a happy and safe Indian Arrival Day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.14 p.m.