

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Wednesday, May 24, 2023

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from Mr. Rushton Paray, MP, Member for Mayaro, who has requested leave of absence from today's sitting of the House. The leave which the Member seeks is granted.

Privilege Matter

(Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, you will recall that a privilege matter was raised by the Member for Barataria/San Juan on Wednesday, May 10, 2023. I will reserve my ruling on that matter to later in today's proceedings.

PAPERS LAID

1. Consolidated Audited Financial Statements of the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2017. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
2. Consolidated Audited Financial Statements of the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2018. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. Audited Financial Statements of the Rural Development Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the year ended September 30, 2022. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. Audited Financial Statements of Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2018. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

UNREVISED

5. Audited Financial Statements of Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
6. Audited Financial Statements of Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
7. Audited Financial Statements of Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2021. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
8. Audited Financial Statements of Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2022. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
9. Audited Financial Statements of Export Centres Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2012. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
10. Audited Financial Statements of Export Centres Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2013. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
11. Audited Financial Statements of Export Centres Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2014. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
12. Audited Financial Statements of Export Centres Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2015. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
13. Audited Financial Statements of Export Centres Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2016. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
14. Audited Financial Statements of Export Centres Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
15. Audited Financial Statements of Export Centres Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2018. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

16. Audited Financial Statements of Export Centres Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
17. Audited Financial Statements of Export Centres Company Limited for the financial year ended September 30, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
18. Audited Financial Statements of the National Infrastructure Development Company Limited (NIDCO) for the financial year ended September 30, 2018. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
19. Audited Financial Statements of the National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited for the year ended December 31, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
20. Audited Financial Statements of the National Maintenance Training and Security Company Limited for the year ended December 31, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
21. Audited Financial Statements of Portfolio Credit Management Limited for the financial year ended December 31, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
Papers 1 to 21 to be referred to the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee.
22. Consolidated Audited Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards and its Subsidiary for the year ended September 30, 2020. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
To be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.
23. Annual Report of the Telecommunications Authority of Trinidad and Tobago (TATT) for the fiscal year 2019/2020. [*The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]

24. Annual Report of the National Information and Communication Technology Company Limited (iGovTT) for the fiscal year 2021/2022. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
25. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Works and Transport to the Second report of the Joint Select Committee on State Enterprises on an Inquiry into the operations of the National Infrastructure Development Company Limited (NIDCO) including its compulsory land acquisition in relation to major projects. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
26. Response of the Office of the Prime Minister to the First Report of the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee on the Examination of Audited Financial Statements of the Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited (UDECOTT) for the financial years 2014 and 2015, First Session, Twelfth Parliament. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

**PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND APPROPRIATIONS COMMITTEE
REPORT**

**Accessibility and Availability of Diagnostic Imaging Services at
Public Health Institutions**

(Presentation)

Dr. Lackram Bodoë (*Fyzabad*): Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have the honour to present:

Twelfth Report of the Public Administration and Appropriations Committee, Third Session, Twelfth Parliament on an examination into the Accessibility and Availability of Diagnostic Imaging Services at Public Health Institutions in Trinidad with specific reference to Regional Health Authorities under the purview of the Ministry of Health.

PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTIONS

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Naparima. Proceed, Member. You proceed.

Functioning of Local Government Bodies**(Urgent Action Taken to Ensure)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. To the Prime Minister: Given the ruling of the Privy Council and its implication for the functioning of our Local Government institutions, will the Prime Minister indicate what urgent action he intends to take to ensure that local government bodies perform their functions efficiently, effectively and legally?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, one thing is certain in Trinidad and Tobago, and that is that notwithstanding the decibels, there is a responsible Government in office.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Having said that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in answer to my colleague from Naparima, I propose to make a statement on this matter in a few minutes and his concerns will be addressed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental, Chaguanas West.

Mr. Rambally: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Hon. Prime Minister: Having had the advantage of an advance copy of the decision of the Privy Council, why is it that the Government is taking so long to make this statement in public's interest?

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to speak in silence please. Could you control Couva South?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Members, I only recognize the Prime Minister. Proceed, Mr. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Standing Orders make provision for follow-up questions, but that is not a question that has not been answered. I have just said that I am going to speak to the matter in a few minutes, and your idea of too long and mine are not the same.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Local Government Elections

(Update on)

Mr. Arnold Ram (*Caroni Central*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. To the hon. Prime Minister: Given the recent judgment of the Privy Council in respect of the delayed Local Government Elections, will the Prime Minister indicate when the Government intends to call the elections?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not aware, in my decades of experience in public life in Trinidad and Tobago, that the calling of elections and when it is done is a matter for other Members, other than those who have to call it. The calling of the election, as it becomes due, is the prerogative of the Prime Minister of the Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And leading a responsible Government in any circumstance, I have just said that I intend to address this matter by way of a prime ministerial statement in a matter of a few minutes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Caribbean Dockyard and Engineering Services Limited
(Buyer or Lease Operator)

Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. To the hon. Prime Minister: Will the Prime Minister state if a buyer or lease operator is being sought or considered for the Caribbean Dockyard and Engineering Services Ltd (Caridoc) which falls under the remit of the Ministry of Works and Transport?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government is not seeking a buyer for Caridoc. In fact, Caridoc, and the role it can play, is extremely important to our diversification effort in marine technology. The Government has appointed a competent qualified group of citizens to form the board of the Caribbean Dockyard and Engineering Services Limited, the company known as Caridoc. They are currently assessing the needs of this company, and that in the context of the national economy.

In the interim, Cabinet has authorized NIDCO to procure for the company an appropriate floating dry dock facility which will be able to service all of our national marine assets, including our fast ferries and coast guard vessels, as well as other commercial requirements.

You may recall, Mr. Deputy Speaker, many months ago that it has been reported that the existing old dry dock did in fact sink in place at Chaguaramas. This attempt to restart the dry docking process in Chaguaramas is an integral part of our national economic diversification progress.

I might add that the company has gone out with a request for proposals— NIDCO has gone out with request for proposals for this dry dock and they are awaiting responses from the open invitations that have been issued. —

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Prime Minister, you mentioned that there is a board in place for this company better known as Caridoc. Could you state who are the board members, please?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: If the notice is given, the appropriate notice to the appropriate Minister, all the details of that can be given. The Government has a number of state boards, and I do not know them all personally to rattle them off to the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental, Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Prime Minister, given the fact that you have just indicated to the House that NIDCO is in the process of procuring dry dock for the continuation of the operations, could you give this House an undertaking that it would be procured in three months, or is the Government setting up the workers for their eventual retrenchment?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I do not see the connections being made by the Member for Couva South. Nothing that I have said has anything to do with retrenchment or the workers per se. It is the company's existence and its offering of a service, which is now not being offered. And we are taking the steps to ensure that the service can be offered, because we have a marine fleet, our coast guard vessels, our inter-island ferry, our ferries to south and, of course, there is a commercial demand. If you know the region, we expect to do business, not only with Trinidad and Tobago assets, but other assets. If we are going to provide these services, we are going to have to require workers. If there are no services being provided, then there will be no justification to have any workers there

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental, Couva South.

Mr. Indarsingh: Prime Minister, could you inform this House what is the estimate of the amount of money the Government has spent repairing or

maintaining its marine assets since the sinking of the floating of this dry dock?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Member, I would not entertain the question at this time. Member for Oropouche West.

**Intelligence Gathering and Analysis Capabilities
(Measures Implemented to Improve)**

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. To hon. Prime Minister: In light of the recent increase in home invasions, will the Prime Minister state what measures have been implemented to improve the intelligence gathering and analysis capabilities of law enforcement agencies specifically targeting organized criminal groups involved in home invasions?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, home invasion is one of the classic crimes of opportunity, and the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service relies on its information gathering and its focus on persons who have chosen crime as a way of life and who may seek such opportunities.

1.45 p.m.

Only recently, Mr. Deputy Speaker, among its other successes, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service has arrested six persons and charged them with respect to home invasions, within the past few days. The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is actively working on addressing the criminal enterprises on home invasion and other aspects of criminal conduct and as long as they get the support of the public and that they focus on using the information gathering technology that is available, we expect to get more and more and better results.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Tancoo: Hon. Prime Minister, in light of your response, can the Prime Minister indicate whether or not anything new is being done given the fact that the same resources that you are describing have been working these issues from time

immemorial, excluding the last two or three years but still, the number of home invasions—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Question, please.

Mr. Tancoo: —continues to increase.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I do not have a measure of the number of criminals who have spawned in Trinidad and Tobago every day nor the number of opportunities that arise. What we do have is a requirement to have a resolve to treat them as they confront us. There are many things that we have been doing since we were in our childhood that are still important to do, like breathing. We have to do what we have to do and the basis of that is responding to the criminal element to head them off, to identify who have committed the crimes and who are about to commit those crimes. The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is operating on that basis, gathering and using information to pursue those who have taken those decisions and those who lay in wait to threaten those who live in any part of this country where such criminal opportunities can present itself to those who choose to do that.

The Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is at work and will always appeal to the public if you know something, if you know something, if you hear something, if you see something, protect yourself and the rest of us by assisting the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service with pertinent information.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Tancoo: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Hon. Prime Minister, are you satisfied that sufficient resources have been allocated to the relevant agencies to ensure that the number of home invasions currently increasing are sufficiently addressed so that we see a reversal of this process?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not sure. I have to listen to the

police with respect to the numbers. If my memory serves me right, I saw the Commissioner of Police saying recently that in terms of complaints, the actual number has not increased. I cannot second-guess that, that is the position of the police commissioner. What I do know, is that we are never going to have all the resources that we need. What you want to ensure is the affordable resources are being put to best use to get the results that we expect and that is what the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service is after.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are some other things that we can do and we are pressing to do those, not the least of which, is to improve community watch arrangements in communities that will help and of course, greater patrolling of our police service and that goes all the way to protecting our rolling stock, protecting our cars, our bikes and of course, people doing the job that they are being paid for. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Tancoo: Hon. Prime Minister, are you satisfied that sufficient resources have been allocated to treat with this scourge of home invasions?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are never going to have all the resources that we think we need. We make allocations to the police service to cover a plethora of concerns, not just home invasions and insofar as resources are being made available, I am not going to tell you yes or no, because if I tell you yes, you will come and say well, if I tell you no, they will say well provide more. I am saying we are doing the best we can with the affordable allocation—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—and if more is required for a specific need, then those requirements will be met within the context of the adjustment of budgets, but in the

meantime, we want to make sure that the allocations as have been made are put to best use and I think that is what the police is doing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

**Levels of gang activity and/or gang violence in T&T
(National Security resources to deal with)**

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. To the hon. Prime Minister: Given the significant resources being expended behind the Trinidad and Tobago National Security infrastructure by the Government, will the Prime Minister explain why there is little or no improvement in arresting the levels of gang activity and/or gang violence across the country?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, the cause and effect, eh? The gangs in Trinidad and Tobago are growing largely on the basis of the opportunities that are provided to some people who believe that crime pays and what we have been seeing is an upsurge in criminal activity. And if I sat here this afternoon or stand here this afternoon and give you a list of all the successes that the police would have had, you would be surprised because the impression is given that nothing is being done. But the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service has been having some significant success, not sufficient to overcome the growth in criminal choices.

But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one thing that has to be taken into account as we look at a question like this, is the revolving door arrangement that the police is facing. A number of those people who engage in this crime for profit arrangement under gangs organized by persons who profit in the criminal empire are persons who come before us, have no fear of arrest, a few days later, they are out on bail and they continue their nefarious conduct. That is the issue that should attract the attention of Members of Parliament.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Because as long as you keep rotating the same number who attract more people to it, it is attractive to those who choose crime as a way of life in our society. The revolving door arrangement has to be stopped.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The morale of police officers has to be supported and sustained because the police are complaining to me as National Security Minister that they put their lives on the line—

Mr. Armour SC: Chairman of the National Security Council.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: As Chairman of the National Security Council, policemen put their lives on the line—

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Policemen I guess would be complaining to all Members of Parliament, they put their lives on the line on a daily and nightly basis to confront the criminal element. They bring them to the fore, identify them for what they have done and as soon as they have done that, the police is saying that those persons seem to have more protection than the police themselves who put their life on the line because the same people are out there committing the crime again and again and again and again and that is what I would like my colleagues in here to focus on, so we could use our authority in this Parliament to make it difficult for criminals to operate on that basis.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And as long we are not prepared to do that in this House—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, a question was asked, the Prime Minister

has the floor. You have not been recognized accordingly.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am simply talking to my colleagues. This is the place where we have to focus on the purpose for which we have come here and as long as we are not prepared to cooperate across this aisle to do what has to be done, to make the criminal empire unattractive to the criminal intent, the criminals will get the upper hand with the police service every day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: That is the biggest resource we can add now. We add money, we add equipment, talk to the police service and they will tell you how they feel about the revolving door arrangement and that has to change if you want to change what you are aiming at.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Heritage Petroleum Company Limited

(Maintenance and repairs of the network of pipeline)

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Prime Minister: Given that Heritage Petroleum Company Limited recently declared an after tax profit of over a billion dollars and that environmental disasters involving oil spills and leaks have been associated with the said company which have impacted on the communities, will the Prime Minister inform this House how much money has been set aside by this state enterprise to be invested in the repair and maintenance of Heritage's network of pipeline?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, what a wonderful day. I am pleased to note that my colleague from Couva South has finally acknowledged that the restructuring of Petrotrin—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: —has resulted in going from losses of billions of dollars to

Heritage being in a position to declare after tax profits—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: —of approximately \$1 billion after paying royalties of almost \$2 billion, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If this epiphany that my friend from Couva South is going through continues, I expect that he will finally acknowledge that the restructured Petrotrin that gave us Heritage is also servicing the US \$850 million debt that the Minister of Finance could not service and would have bankrupt [*Inaudible*].

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am glad that he acknowledged at least one component of our success and Heritage is dealing with aged infrastructure which they inherited from Shell, Texaco, Tesoro, Trintoc, Petrotrin and now Heritage. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the company has a programme of assessing the quality of that infrastructure which is aged and some of it even dangerous and recently has spent as much as \$9 million in the inspection programme.

With respect to spending money on change out of certain aspects of the pipeline infrastructure, Heritage is currently spending approximately \$15 million a year which is small for an oil company but given where the company has come from, where it is going, we expect that that amount, it will increase as we go forward as more and more money is spent on strengthening the infrastructure as the company expects to be using more of it across a wider area in Trinidad. Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Given your evasive leadership in the last eight years—

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, question, question.

Mr. Indarsingh: —and that pipeline integrity is a serious issue which has implications for health safety and the environment, especially in residential areas, could you inform—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, question.

Mr. Indarsingh: —this House if the Heritage has engaged the Occupational Safety and Health Authority or some specialized company to engage in a safety assessment and risk audit of all of its pipelines?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have just said that Heritage Company has spent over \$9 million an inspection programme. If you want further details of that inspection programme, then you will file the appropriate question to the appropriate Minister with notice.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Naparima.

**Extension of Mrs. Erla Harewood-Christopher's position
(Measurable performance criteria used)**

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Thank you. Will the Prime Minister state what measurable performance criteria were used to inform his decision to offer a one year contract to extend Mrs. Erla Harewood Christopher's position as Commissioner of Police?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know that my colleague from Naparima and his friends have something against a substantive appointment of a Police Commissioner.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: This Government does not subscribe to the fact that a temporary acting position is the best leadership for the police service because they will do the work better. That was the UNC position. In February, we were in this

very House and that is only a few weeks ago. It is now what? March, April, May, three months, 12 weeks ago, just about 12 weeks ago, this very House used the criteria sent to us by selection from the Service Commission to appoint Mrs. Christopher as the substantive Commissioner of Police. I do not believe that my colleague from Naparima is saying in the last 12 weeks that we have should have had new criteria on an officer who has just go on to office 12 weeks ago.

Mr. Charles: You could have had an assessment.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And you wanted an assessment, I will tell you, we are using the same assessment we used 12 weeks ago because from the standpoint, that does not change.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: As a matter of fact, it was Members on the Opposition who pointed that the requirement will change very quickly because she was close to requirement age and ask the Government what is going to happen and I told this House that because of the provision in place for contract appointment of continuation, we expect that there will be a continuation with Cabinet approval because she was close to her retirement age.

2:00 p.m.

It was the Opposition that raised that, so to come here 12 weeks later, and ask what is the criteria, you are abusing the opportunity to ask a question.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you Members, thank you Members.

Naparima, proceed.

Minister of National Security
(Refusal to Answer Question No. 79)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Will the Prime Minister explain why the Minister of National Security has, on four occasions, refused to answer (written) Question No.79 concerning the ineffectiveness of our Coast Guard, even in spite of a letter written on April 24, 2023, by the Honourable Speaker under SO 29(13)?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I subscribe to the content of the great poem *Desiderata*, I am to:

“..Avoid loud and aggressive persons...”

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

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: —because they are vexatious to the spirit.

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

Hon. Member: You are [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I will tell you Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, again, I recognize the Prime Minister at this time. Everyone else will have their opportunity after. Proceed.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I adhere Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I am advised by my colleague on my left, that question 79 will be answered today, and I simply want to say to my colleague from Naparima, the fact that you wrote a letter, or asked a question does not mean that we have to answer you and expose public national security secrets.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental. Member for Naparima.

Regional Crime Symposium
(Tangible Crime Fighting Benefits)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Will the Prime Minister state the tangible crime fighting benefits which have accrued to our country arising from the Regional Crime Symposium held in mid-April 2023?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Prime Minister.

Mr. Charles: Measurable.

The Prime Minister (Hon Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are very few things that I share with my colleague from Naparima, so what he might regard as tangible might not be the same with me. I have said, Mr Deputy Speaker, that one of the benefits, which would be observed by anyone who was paying attention, is accelerated regional cooperation, which could only benefit our citizens, especially our major crime concerns which are illicit movement of guns, ammunition, drugs, and human beings for trafficking purposes. Because all of these crimes which reflect heavily in the Trinidad and Tobago statistics have a serious international complexion. And from that standpoint alone, the cooperation between regional police units at the highest level sharing information and equipment and personnel and expertise can only benefit the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

And secondly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago has been in the forefront of treating this issue of the outcome of violent crimes throughout our society in a sustained basis as a public health issue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Our colleagues have described this symposium as a waste of time, a talk shop, and that it is impossible and ridiculous to regard crime as a

public health issue. We do not agree. Anything, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which sees every weekend a certain number of people, seven, eight, 10 people even dead, and during the week another eight, or 10, or 15 as is happening across the region, if any disease was having that level of death in our country, it would have been seen as a public health emergency.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And interestingly enough, my colleagues would be surprised to know that exactly what has happened in Trinidad and Tobago in the last few months, including the declaration of violent crimes as public health emergency, is now being done in a number of states in the United States and I am sure that that is [*Inaudible*].

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Naparima.

Mr. Charles: It is clear the Prime Minister does not know the meaning of tangible.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Question please.

Death of Kisseh Lendor

(Non-Equipment of Body Cameras)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): Given the death of Kisseh Lendor at the hands of CID officers and that the people of Carenage have reportedly claimed that it was an unjustified killing, will the Prime Minister state why, after significant expenditures, all frontline police officers are not yet equipped with body cameras? I find that 'ah' shame.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will not take the word of Member for Naparima that all frontline officers are not equipped.

I do not know the standing orders in the police service, and who is a frontline officer in any circumstance. That is a matter for the Commissioner of Police. What I do know is that resources have been made available for more and more officers to have, and at last Sitting, the Commissioner of Police addressed this matter publicly, and I think the figure of approximately 2,000 cameras were obtained. Mr. Deputy Speaker, 1,100 cameras were obtained, and have been placed for use by the said frontline officers, and another substantial purchase is being made for this express purpose. So there is no need to misrepresent the facts, and if more is required, more resources would be made available because the objective is to have as many situations where police is involved be recorded in such a way that it can be utilized in confirming how the confrontation, or lack thereof, took place involving the police and citizens. So this is not a matter to detain us. It is a matter that is underway.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Caroni Central.

Heritage Petroleum Company Limited

(Terms and Conditions of new CEO)

Mr. Arnold Ram (*Caroni Central*): Thank you Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will the Prime Minister state the terms and conditions of the new Chief Executive Officer of Heritage Petroleum Company Limited?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister (Hon Dr. Keith Rowley): Mr. Deputy Speaker, the total compensation package offered to the Chief Executive Officer of Heritage Petroleum is as follows.

The cash compensation:

- Base salary, \$180,000 per month;

- A relocation allowance of 7 per cent, which is TT\$12,600 per month; and
- A completion bonus of TT\$180,000 payable at the end of the six-month probation.

Non-cash benefits:

- The value of housing, up to approximately US\$5,000 per month;
- A company vehicle maintained by Heritage, with a driver during the probationary period, and subsequent to that, a vehicle purchase at a value of up to \$700,000;
- Utilities to be supported by the company;
- A return airfare to his home country at the end for employee and spouse;
- International medical insurance for employee, spouse and two dependents;
- International life insurance for the employee only; and
- 20 working days per annum of vacation.

There is an annual bonus arrangement that is to be discussed with the company—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Prime Minister, your speaking time has elapsed. We must conform to the order of the House with regard to time and so on. That is the end of Prime Minister's questions.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

URGENT QUESTIONS

Pregnant Teenage Girls within State Homes

(Steps taken to determine circumstances)

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you Mr. Deputy Speaker. In light of the recent revelations that two teenage girls are pregnant within state homes under

the purview of the Children's Authority, will the Minister update the House on what urgent steps have been taken to determine the circumstances under which these pregnancies occurred?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Ayanna Webster-Roy):

Thank you Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to advise the Member for Princes Town to report any information he has on the matter to the police. The Member seems to have very intimate information and knowledge of what would have happened and I want to encourage the Member to please report it to the police.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, having said that, I wish to state for the benefit of this House and the national population, that anybody who has information regarding persons under the age of 18 engaging in sexual activity, that person must report it to the police.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago handles all reports regarding pregnancies of girls under the age of 18 who are residents in state care with discretion and utmost caution.

2.10 p.m.

However, what is done primarily is an investigation, not only by the Children's Authority, but also by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. Once an allegation or a report that a child is pregnant, or a child is being abused in state care, the first response of the Authority is to cause a psychosocial assessment to be done to ensure that the child's needs are met, to ensure that any child who may be aware,

or any child residing in the facility who may be impacted, is catered to effectively and efficiently.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, notwithstanding all of that, there is a criminal investigation that is caused to be in effect when the report is made, not only by the Children's Authority, but by the home as well. So those are the steps that we take. The report comes in, it is reported to the police. It is reported to the Children's Authority. The Children's Authority goes in, provides the relevant psychosocial support to the child, as well as other children residing in the home to ensure that their safety is of utmost priority. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Princes Town.

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in light of the information that the hon. Minister has provided in her response, could the Minister indicate on what date did the Children's Authority make the report to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service? Because on May 16, 2023, the TTPS contacted me—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member—

Mr. Padarath: —asking for the information saying—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member—

Mr. Padarath:—that there was no—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member!

Mr. Padarath:—report that has been made to the TTPS.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member!

Mr. Padarath: Yes. I am asking what date, Sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right. Your question.

Mr. Padarath: I am asking on what day did the Children's Authority contact the

TTPS?

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Mr Deputy Speaker, the information coming to me as Minister is from the time a report is made to the Children's Authority, the Children's Authority reports this to the police. It is up to the police then to conduct their investigation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Naparima.

\$234 Million Drug Bust

(Security Measures at Ports of Entry)

Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*): To the Minister of National Security, in light of the recent \$234 million drug bust, will the Minister state what urgent measures are being contemplated to ensure that our ports of entry are secured and to arrest the masterminds behind this incident?

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, bearing in mind that this matter is still under investigation, aspects of it, active investigation, and bearing in mind that persons charged in this bust are now before the courts, I want to take this opportunity, and I hope my friend would join me, to congratulate the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and our international partners with whom collaboration is a daily occurrence, for this success in protecting the people of Naparima, the people Trinidad and Tobago, from the filth and the horror that that would have brought to us, had it not been for their success. I want to congratulate the police.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Having said that, and in light of the elements that I have identified, these are issues of national security. And the criminals are listening to

these questions and the answers that are given. And this is why, I agree with the Prime Minister, that we have to take stock of what we are doing in here and work collaboratively to protect the people of Trinidad and Tobago, rather than to expose them, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

In light of that, I would say that we have a radar system. It is now 360 degree fully functional, watching what is happening around. But there is no coast guard fleet in the world that has the capacity to patrol all of the ports of entry, legal or illegal. None. Trinidad and Tobago being no different. But we do have a complement of vessels. We should have had more. We had three OPVs, which were cancelled by his government and they are now in the Brazilian fleet.

To redress that problem, when we came back to Government in 2015, we ordered in 2018, two Cape-class vessels, which were delivered in 2021, to protect the borders of which that Member just spoke. And we would have been a lot further ahead had they not intervened in the way that they did. We have to pay particular attention to our legal ports of entry, where we are—thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Member. Supplemental, Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Could the Minister state why, after eight years, no big boy, no mastermind involved in drugs is before the courts at this moment. Is it because they are financiers of Balisier House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Listen, listen, Member.

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

Hon. F. Hinds: Mr. Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Hinds: Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hello, Members—

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members. Members, as previously identified on one of the sittings by the Speaker, continuous desk thumping can be considered— with regard to the decorum of this particular House. So, again, I would make mention of it today, and we will continue as we go along.

Again, Member for Naparima, according to the Standing Orders, you know you have 15 seconds in order to ask your question. I would like you to retract the last statement you made and you are free to ask your question, if you still so desire.

Mr. Charles: I retract the statement, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right. Thank you. Fine. Do you have an—

Mr. Charles: Yes, yes, I do.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. Charles: Why is it, as of today, our ports are not supplied with scanners, so that guns, ammunition and drugs can enter our country undetected by your incompetent Government?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister of National Security.

Hon. F. Hinds: It is not correct to say that our ports are not in use of—or scanners are not being used at our ports. That is not correct. We have fixed scanners. We have mobile scanners, and like all other equipment, they need upgrading, and they need maintenance from time to time. But it is not correct to say so, and that is the kind of thing that the Member for Naparima and his friends do; cast horrible aspersions on political parties, on people, and most of all on all of Trinidad and Tobago. And I reject him and I reject that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental, Couva South? Last one.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I stand—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Okay. Standing Order—

Mr. Indarsingh: —seeking clarification.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, please, please.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we will be answering all the oral questions that have been asked. With regard to the written responses, I am asking for a two-week deferral for question 147.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Oropouche West, 148.

Mr. Tancoo: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: 148, eh, Member.

Mr. Tancoo: Question No. 156 to the hon. Minister of Finance.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: My apologies. Again, Oropouche West, question 159—

Hon. Members: 156.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: 156, sorry. Number 156, Member Oropouche West, please.

Mr. Tancoo: Thank you again, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

VAT-Registered Business in Trinidad and Tobago

(Funds Owed)

156. Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

Will the Minister state the overall sum of funds owed to all the VAT-registered businesses in Trinidad and Tobago to date?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The value added tax system has the potential to generate

significant government revenue. However, despite its intrinsic self-enforcement capacity, many tax administrations find it challenging to refund excess input credits also known as VAT refunds.

Most VAT laws around the world include provisions for this feature, that is to say that taxpayers can claim legitimate excess input VAT credits and receive refunds within prescribed deadlines. However, the world over, the reality is often different from the VAT laws' intentions. Country experience, especially in developing countries, shows that access to VAT refunds is often limited. The requirements that taxpayers must meet to claim VAT refunds and the associated tax administration procedures are quite complex. When taxpayers do claim such refunds, it is the experience in many countries that they do experience delays. This is not unique to Trinidad and Tobago.

These delays are not the result of the VAT's design, but stem from inadequate legal and institutional frameworks and weak administrative capacity to identify VAT refund fraud—I think we saw something in the newspapers about that today—and to implement practical and workable preventative measures. In our case, in 2019, the International Monetary Fund's Fiscal Affairs Department undertook, at the request of Government, an exercise to measure the non-compliance VAT gap. That is the difference between, on the one hand, the potential VAT that could be collected, had all taxpayers complied with their obligations, and the actual VAT accrued. This difference represents lost revenue for the State. As part of that exercise, the FAD applied the Revenue Administration Gap Analysis Program, value added tax estimation methodology for Trinidad and Tobago, for the period 2012 to 2017. That application revealed that the estimated non-compliance VAT, as opposed to the policy gap, was approximately 2 per cent of GDP, that is to say \$4 billion at current levels.

This is one of the reasons why the Government is pushing ahead with the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority to introduce new methods and specialist resources to close this huge \$4 billion VAT gap, and remove, as far as possible, avenues for fraud and under-reporting.

It should also be noted that the question of outstanding VAT refunds is not new. The records indicate that the amount of VAT refunds stood at \$3 billion in May 2010. And notwithstanding record levels of income and expenditure in the 2010 to 2015 period, the amount of VAT outstanding refunds increased under the former administration to \$4.6 billion by September 2015.

The present Government thus inherited close to \$5 billion in outstanding VAT refunds when it took office in 2015. Specifically, the value of that refunds amount to \$7.8 billion at the end of March. This is a figure that changes every day. The timeline to clear the backlog of VAT refunds is dependent on the availability of cash flow and administrative reforms, consequent on the full implementation of the revenue authority. we expect the revenue authority to significantly reduce the amount of VAT refunds claimed.

But I am pleased to announce, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Cabinet recently agreed to the issuance of VAT bonds in the aggregate sum of \$3 billion to assist with the settlement of outstanding VAT refunds to be issued in tranches. These bonds will be issued in June and August 2023—between June and August 2023; July as well.

As in the past, these bonds would be suitably priced to allow full redemption at par in the commercial banks—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have just about 40 seconds.

Hon. C. Imbert: —100 cents on the dollar. The bonds will earn interest at the rate of 3.15 per cent over three years and applications can be made online at the Inland Revenue Division's website.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental, Oropouche West.

Mr. Tancoo: Thank you, hon. Minister for that very long treatise on what is wrong with the system. However, I am glad you asked me to ask the question, because I want to repeat the question, which you did not answer, Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, question.

Mr. Tancoo: Will the Minister state the overall sum of funds owed to all the VAT-registered businesses in Trinidad and Tobago to date? That is a simple question, just a number. “Not all this story”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Member. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the tragedies of the new crop of Opposition MPs is that they do not listen. I said the value of VAT refunds at the end of March was \$7.8 billion, and it changes every day. I answered the question. You just do not listen, hon. Member.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Carnival Activities - Caribbean Airlines Limited

(List of)

157. Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

Will the Minister provide a list of all the Carnival activities for which Caribbean Airlines Limited provided financial support and the dollar value of each?

2.25 p.m.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The carnival activities for which Caribbean Airlines provided

financial support, and the dollar value of each are as follows: The National Carnival Commission received the sum of \$250,000 for our Trinidad and Tobago carnival in 2023. And the Machel 40.1 show received the sum of \$1,275,000.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Supplemental, Oropouche West.

Mr. Tancoo: Thank you. Can the hon. Minister indicate if there is a policy position that an airline, a company, that is not generating a profit which is in fact generating a net loss—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please.

Mr. Tancoo: —can the Minister indicate whether there is a policy decision that allows this entity to engage in donations, especially when it is not making a profit?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, we did not give \$5 million for a song, but the Machel Montano One Show partnership provided the highest brand visibility platform for amplification of the Caribbean Airlines “Welcome Home” brand story for 2023. In line with the refreshed branding and the strategic five-way expansion plans, it is imperative that Caribbean Airlines differentiates itself as the leading airline of the Caribbean.

This partnership provided extensive channels for Caribbean Airlines to target the diaspora via digital media such as Spotify, Apple music, Pandora, Shazam, Amazon, and Deezer. These streaming platforms, which featured the Machel One Show, reached countries as wide as India, Russia, South Africa, France, Japan, United Kingdom, and the French Caribbean. The Machel Montano video attained the highest performance on Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook to date. The advertising strategy focused on driving brand awareness. The ticket sales on the Caribbean Airlines website as a result of the Machel Montano “Welcome Home” video were in the amount of US\$1,151,000, seven times the

amount of sponsorship given by Caribbean Airlines.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

Mr. Imbert: Supplemental?

Collapsed Main Pipe – Godineau River

(Update of)

160. Dr. Lackram Bodoë (*Fyzabad*) asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:

Further to the response provided to House of Representatives Question No. 70 on January 23, 2023, will the Minister provide an update on the status of the works on the collapsed Water and Sewage Authority Main pipe at the Godineau River?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister of Public Utilities.

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Water and Sewerage Authority, WASA, has advised that a contract was awarded to a specialized firm to undertake the works to remove the damaged WASA main and aged supporting steel structure from the Godineau River on May 18, 2023, and a contractor mobilization commenced on May 19, 2023.

WASA advised further, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the procurement process took a little longer than expected because of the need to first procure the services of an external specialized consultant, an expert diving firm to undertake inspection, and surveillance of the fallen track under the sea to assist in developing the scope of works for the invitation to tender, as well assisting in evaluating the tender. The project, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is expected to be completed by the end of June 2023.

Mr. Deputy-Speaker: Supplemental, Fyzabad.

Mr. Bodoë: Thank you Minister for that update. Minister, in regard to the WASA

release that indicated they start to do works, there was also mention of a booster pump and a rubber gasket to repair the new line, can you indicate whether that work was done?

Mr. Deputy-Speaker: Member, I would not allow that question at this time.

STATEMENT BY MINISTER

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):

Thank you Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I seek your leave in accordance with Standing Order 122(1) to move a Motion for the suspension of Standing Order 24(3), which provides the time limit for statements by Ministers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, leave is granted.

Mr. Charles: Division.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: “Wait nah, wait. Oh gorm, allyuh doh know de Standing Orders, wait.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Wait.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Leader of the House.

Hon. C. Robinson Regis: They “doh” know the Standing Orders.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Leader of the House, proceed.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Can I go ahead, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Thank you. Now, look and learn.

Hon. Members: “Ooooh.”

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member one second. Again—

Mr. Indarsingh: “Cyah be de” Speaker of the House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right, so, Leader of the House.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: As I said, look and learn. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move that Standing Order 24(3) be suspended to permit the Prime Minister to the complete his statement.

Question proposed.

Mr. Hosein: Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: A division has been called, proceed.

The House divided: Ayes 18 Noes 15

AYES

Robinson-Regis, Hon. C.

Rowley, Dr. K.

Imbert, Hon. C.

Young, Hon. S.

Hinds, Hon. F

Al-Rawi, Hon. F.

Beckles, Hon. P.

Webster-Roy, Hon. A.

Gadsby-Dolly, Hon Dr. N.

Gonzales, Hon. M.

Mc Clashie, Hon. S.

Cummings, Hon. F.

de Nobriga, Hon. S.

Leonce, Hon. A.

Manning, Hon. B.

Morris-Julien Hon. L.

Scotland, K.

Cudjoe, Hon. S.

NOES

Lee, Mr. D.

Persad-Bissessar SC, Mrs. K.

Charles, R.

Ameen, Ms. K.

Indarsingh, R.

Padarath, B.

Hosein, S.

Rambally, D.

Bodoe, Dr. L.

Ram, A.

Ragbir, Dr. R.

Tancoo, D.

Haynes, Ms. A.

Ratiram, R.

Seecheran, Dr. R.

Clerk at the Table: Mr. Cummings.

Mr. Cummings: I voted already.

Clerk at the Table: Oh, you voted already.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Question agreed to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members on a division, for 18, against 15, no abstentions. The vote is carried. Hon. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker I presume that I have the floor?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes, Sir.

Privy Council Judgement

Local Government Reform

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have been authorized by the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago to make the following statement. Mr. Deputy Speaker, local government reform has been an elusive dream of this nation for decades. Not only has it been recommended, promised, studied, consulted, and attempted, but it remains a deed to be done. This Government, this PNM Government, had undertaken to get it done.

In October 2020, amendments were introduced by the Government to bring about a comprehensive reform of the Municipal Corporations Act 1990. This was introduced by the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020, which was introduced into Parliament and was sent before a joint select committee.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020, introduced to the Parliament in 2020, was a comprehensive process of law reform of local government management and elections undertaken by this Government. In a genuine desire to bring about local government reform to better serve the burgesses and improve the quality of their lives through increased responsibility, autonomy, and better fiscal operations, that Bill was eventually debated and passed by both Houses of Parliament, noticeably, Mr. Deputy Speaker, without Opposition support. It was assented to on 01 July, 2022, and became Act No. 11 of 2022, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Act, 2022.

Notwithstanding the difficulties, lack of support from some of our colleagues, and myriad obstacles in the way, this Government believes that the reformed and modernized system of local government as presented after years of complaints and resultant widespread consultation was in the best interest of the nation as a whole.

It was within this mission that the Government pressed on cautiously but resolutely to bring about by the passage of the new law and the sectional step-by-step proclamation as the necessary preparations be were made to operationalizing the new arrangements in an orderly and effective manner.

Some of these reform measures are quite novel and far reaching and the Government's intention was that the best way to at ease these into being was to have extended the application of the terms of the new law as intended to the incumbents in such a way that it afforded some element of a smooth transition.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is stating the short extension of the life of the incumbents, and it was the Government interpretation and option that this exigency was taken care of, in the provisions of the new law. By Legal Notice No. 206 of 2022, dated 07 November, 2022, a number of sections of this Act were proclaim and came into force on 08 November, 2022. This triggered an interpretation battle opportunity.

In democratic systems, Mr. Deputy Speaker, challenges to governmental actions intentions and even legislation are not new, nor daunting indeed; they are symptomatic of a vibrant and free democracy. On 15 November, 2022, an ordinary activist citizen filed an application for leave to apply for judicial review. The dispute concerned the interpretation of the amended provisions of sections 11 sub section (4) and section 12 subsection (5) of the Municipal Corporations Act,

Chap. 25:04.

2.40 p.m.

On the 21st of November, 2022, the applicant filed an application for interim relief in which he sought, among other orders, an injunction pursuant to section 18(1)(a) of the Judicial Review Act, Chap. 7:08, restraining all persons presently holding office as councillors and aldermen, who were elected by virtue of the local government elections held on the 2nd December, 2019, or in any subsequent by-elections, from acting in the said offices beyond the 3rd December, 2022, pending the determination of the main judicial review claim.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, a key issue which arose in these proceedings concern the meaning of the amended provisions of section 11(4) and section 12(5) of the Municipal Corporations Act. The High Court employed this approach to the interpretation of legislation governed by established legal principles, which require a court to discern the intention of Parliament as expressed in the language under consideration. The High Court expressed the view that it must begin its task by carefully considering the language of the particular provisions and must interpret the language so far as possible in a way that gives effect to its purpose.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in accordance with the principles of law, applicable to interim applications, the High Court judge firstly formed the view that the dispute over the interpretation of the relevant sections did give rise to a serious issue to be determined on the main application for judicial review. Secondly, and accordingly, on the application for interim injunction and consistent with applicable principles of law, she proceeded next to evaluate the balance of hardship or convenience, which would be caused by the grant or refusal of the interim

injunction, pending the determination of the main application for a judicial review claim.

In evaluating the balance of hardship or convenience, the High Court judge came to the conclusion on the interim application that having regard to the range of services that corporations provide to the community, the potential impact of disruption, the scope of the measures that may be taken in absence of a functioning council, and the fact that the alleged unlawful consequences asserted by the applicant turn upon the construing and meaning and intent of the legislation, the validity of which was not in dispute, the court refused to grant the injunction, ruling that the refusal of an injunction was likely to cause the least amount of irreparable harm and prejudice.

Accordingly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the 30th November, 2022, the High Court refused the interim injunction relief, with cost being reserved. Accordingly, the challenge brought by the applicant did not succeed on the interim application and the corporations continued to function lawfully, consistent with the provisions of the Municipal Corporations Act, and supported by the decision of the High Court.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, on the 1st December, 2022, the applicant appealed to the Court of Appeal from the refusal of the High Court to grant the injunction and filed an application for an expedited and urgent appeal on the same day, 1st December, 2022. On the appeal, the Court of Appeal agreed that having regard to the importance of the case and the seriousness of the consequences, it would determine the core issue in the substantive claim, namely sections 11 and 12 of the Municipal Corporations Act, as amended by the 2022 Act, applied to the incumbent councillors and aldermen.

On the 10th February, 2023, in a unanimous judgment, the Court of Appeal dismissed the applicant's appeal, but granted permission to appeal to the Privy Council. Accordingly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the challenge brought by the applicant did not succeed, and by the decision of the Court of Appeal, the corporations continued to function lawfully, consistent with the provisions of the Municipal Corporations Act and supported by unanimous decision of the Court of Appeal. On the 13th February, 2023, the applicant/appellant appealed to the Privy Council. On the 18th May 2023, the Privy Council delivered its judgment.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, all five judges of the Privy Council decided that a change in the length of the terms of office of the incumbent councillors and aldermen did not amount to a contravention or breach of any provision of the Constitution. This decision, studiously arrived at, did not prevent some of my colleagues in this House, and some elements in the media, from continuing to accuse the Government of Trinidad and Tobago of breaching the constitutional rights of citizens. To this accusation Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government pleads not guilty.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, all the way to the Privy Council, the Government and the legal luminaries viewed this entire matter to us one of interpretation of an intent. It is important—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I seek your protection from the Member for Naparima, please?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members, I recognize only the Prime Minister at this time. Please proceed.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. All the way to the Privy Council, the Government and the legal luminaries viewed this entire matter as one of interpretation of an intent. It is important to note that up to Wednesday, 17 May, 2022, the Government's interpretation prevailed—sorry, '23. Sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker—17 May, 2023, the Government's interpretation prevailed, supported by reasoned decisions of our local courts, which are the High Courts and the Courts of Appeal. This is the proof that our legal and protection systems worked, and at no time did the Government act with impunity, or wanton disregard for our laws, or with any malicious intent towards citizens and their rights.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The grant of the appeal—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Member: Put him out.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: —I would like to invoke Standing Order 53(1)(e), please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right. So, again, hon. Members, this will be the last time, right, this will be the last time any Member will be given the opportunity to create any disruption. Hon. Prime Minister, proceed.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As I was saying, all the way to the Privy Council, the Government and the legal luminaries viewed this entire matter as one of interpretation of an intent. It is important to note that up to Wednesday, 17 May, 2023, the Government's interpretation prevailed, supported by the reasoned decisions of our local courts, the High Court and the Court of Appeal. This is the proof that our legal and protection systems worked and at no

time did the Government act with impunity, or wanton disregard for our laws, or with any malicious intent towards citizens and their rights. The grant of the appeal to the Privy Council is further proof of the systems being allowed to work, as we proceed with all good intention of effecting local government reform.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, given the nature of the interpretation problem being grappled with, it was not surprising that there was a split decision at the Privy Council, where Lords Richards, Reid and Hodge, in paragraph 20 of the judgment, had this to say—and I hold it out to Members on the other side, in particular:

“...on any footing...”

And I am quoting here from the judgment:

“...on any footing, the absence of any detailed provisions concerning local government elections leads to the inevitable conclusion that a change in the length of the terms of office of incumbent Councillors and Aldermen cannot amount to a contravention of the Constitution. The term for which representatives have been elected is important but an increased by one year in the term of incumbent Councillors and Aldermen does not of itself breach any of the provision of the Constitution.”

Additionally, in the final declaration, two judges voted in favour of preserving the status quo of the successful defences of the relevant interpretation and three voted to disagree and thus changed the status quo to a new interpretation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we see a change, not a crisis, and there is definitely no need for the mayhem, sackcloth and ashes that some desire.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Throughout, therefore, the challenge brought by the applicant and the appellant did not succeed until 18th May, 2023, with the

corporations continuing to function lawfully, consistent with the provisions of the Municipal Corporations Act, and supported until then by the unanimous decision of the Court of Appeal of Trinidad and Tobago. The outcome of the final court reverses discomfort and the Government must now act to rectify any shortcomings that now exist that was not there before. I refer here specifically to the actions and workings of the local government for the affected period December 2022 to the date of the adverse ruling and beyond.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the simple question to be determined at every stage in this legal contest was whether a matter of construction, applying relevant principles of construction, the amendments to sections 11 and 12 apply to incumbent councillors and aldermen at the time that the amendments came into force. The majority decided the amendments applied to councillors and aldermen after the amendments came into force and not to the incumbent councillors and aldermen. The minority decided that the amendments did apply to the incumbent councillors and aldermen. So even down to the bitter end, there is a divergence of views on this prickly interpretation of meaning of the contested section. However, I want to make it abundantly clear that the Government has no choice but to accept the ruling of the Privy Council and be guided by its findings and the effect on operations and intentions.

It is important to note, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that throughout the challenge brought by the applicant and the appellant, it did not succeed until the 18th May, 2023, with the corporations continuing to function lawfully, consistent to the provision of the Municipal Corporations Act, and supported them by unanimous decision of the Court of Appeal of Trinidad and Tobago.

2.55 p.m.

As of the date, 18th May, 2023, a new situation developed requiring the Government to respond. The Attorney General has already engaged and described the calming principles as set out in law in the context of de facto officer doctrine. By the application of the common law, de facto officer doctrine, the actions and decisions of the corporations will be recognized by law as valid. Consistent with that advice, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Deputy Chief Parliamentary Council is in the process of drafting the necessary legislation to validate all acts of the corporations from December 2022, up to the 18th May, 2023. Clearly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, notwithstanding the outpourings of glee on the part of those who challenge behind the coats of men of straw, there is no crisis as some so triumphantly wish for. All that is required is for the Government to act within a reasonably time frame to maintain an orderly response and effect the necessary processes, including the calling of elections, gleaned within the ruling set out by the Privy Council.

Following the decision of the Privy Council on the 18th May, the time for calling an election is now past due. The Government is duty-bound to call an election in accordance with the statutory procedure prescribed in the Act and the Representation of the People Act. Pursuant to the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, the President, acting in accordance with the advice of the Cabinet, and that is found in section 81 of the Constitution, is now to be mandated to issue a writ setting the local government elections in motion. Under existing law, a period of not less than 35 days must lapse between the issue of the writ and the taking of the poll. Immediately, and within three months of the 18th May, the Government will move to issue the writ so that a poll can be taken within the usual 90-day window.

With the arrival of the new decision, the option always exists to extend the

office of incumbents up to the 18th May so as to validate the actions prior to May 18th and to call an election to be held within three months of the 18th May, 2023. Of the many options available, this is the one most suitable and the one chosen by the Government at this time. Consistent with this advice and decision, the Deputy Chief Parliamentary Counsel is on standby for the drafting of the necessary legislation to validate all acts of the corporation from December 2022, up to the 18th May, 2023, and for the further three-month period from 18th of May.

This piece of legislation is expected to be ready to be laid in Parliament and debated and taken through all its stages in this honourable House on Monday the 29th May, 2023. Once this is accomplished, the date for local government within the 90-day window will be announced, and with that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for your cooperation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. Thank you. Well, we have one question under 24. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes, you do.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Sir. Hon. Prime Minister, through you, kindly indicate, if you can clarify, what is the status of the existing incumbents apart from the chairmen and mayors?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thought I was crystal clear, and I am not the legal adviser of the Opposition Leader; I have said everything I need to say on this matter. I have said everything I need to say on this matter. I have covered the

period up to the decision of May 18th, and I have indicated the action of the Government going forward from May 18th to 90 days, and I have no further advice to give the Opposition Leader, except—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. Rowley:—except to ask her to stop writing all over the world and “nastying up” Trinidad and Tobago’s name.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Mr. Charles: I rise on 48(4)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, Member, I am not entertaining.

Mr. Charles: That is insulting—

Hon. Member: Sit down.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am not—

Ms. Ameen: Who you shouting at?

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Imputing improper motives—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members—

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: —insulting, offensive, 48.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member—Member, please. Proceed. Procedural Clerk, proceed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Attorney General.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Standing Finance Committee’s Discussions

(Friday 5th May, 2023)

The Attorney General and Minister in the Ministry of Legal Affairs (Sen. The

Hon. Reginald Armour SC): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr.

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Discussions Friday 5th May, 2023
Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC (cont'd)

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Deputy Speaker, with your leave, I wish to address the following. During the Standing Finance Committee's discussions in this House on Friday 5th May, 2023, Opposition Member, hon. Saddam Hosein, Member of Parliament, stated—and it is taken from *Hansard*—that he had asked me to provide a breakdown of all of the attorneys who would be collecting fees particular to the Head that was being engaged at the relevant time. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in response to the Opposition Member's questions, I responded at the time with reference to documents which had been provided to me and were in my possession in the Parliament during the Standing Finance Committee's discussions. In so doing, I inadvertently and incorrectly stated that the breakdown of fees for the period June 19, 2021 to March 03, 2023, had been provided to the Parliament.

In so doing, I mistakenly relied on a document containing a breakdown of legal fees paid by the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Same decorum of the House entails. Only the Attorney General is recognized at this time.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: I repeat, in response to the Opposition Member's remarks, I responded at the time with reference to documents which had been provided to me and were in my possession in the Parliament during the Standing Finance Committee's discussions.

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 53(1)(e), please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Couva South, could you depart the Chamber

and return when the Attorney General has completed his explanation? Leave in silence, please.

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: “A-a. A-a.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Listen—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—I have ruled. I have ruled. Members—Members, I have ruled.

Mr. Indarsingh: Based on what?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I have ruled.

Hon. Member: Based on what?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You will return when the AG has completed his discourse.

Mr. Charles: Could you indicate the Standing Order—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Naparima, I have ruled.

Ms. Ameen: What—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Indarsingh: I am seeking guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What did I do?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I have ruled. Proceed.

Mr. Indarsingh: What infraction—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Member: Ruled on what?

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: What you ruled on?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Listen, I have ruled. Member for Couva South, please depart the Chamber and return when the AG has finished, in silence.

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Naparima, in silence.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Listen, Members, I have ruled. Please have your seat. Please have your seat.

Ms. Ameen: Ruled on what?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Couva South, you are keeping back the discourse.

Mr. Indarsingh: I am showing respect to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you were on your legs—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh:—and I was just complying with the Standing Orders.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: [*Inaudible*]—you shouting—[*Inaudible*]

Mr. Indarsingh: I know my rights under the Standing Orders, Leader of Government Business.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

[*Member for Couva South departs Chamber*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And again, Members, as I have stated earlier, I have recognized the Attorney General, and please let him do his discourse in silence. Proceed.

Sen. The Hon. R. Armour SC: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Before the interruption, I was referring to the fact that I had been responding to the Member's questions of me with reference to documents which had been provided to me and were in my possession in the Parliament during the Standing Finance Committee's discussions. In so doing, I inadvertently and incorrectly stated that the breakdown of fees for the period, June 19, 2021 to March 03, 2023, had been provided to the Parliament. In so doing, I mistakenly relied on a document containing a

breakdown of legal fees paid by the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs. This breakdown had been provided by the administrative officer of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs by letter dated 5th April, 2023, in response to a freedom of information request submitted to the Office of the Attorney General.

This breakdown of fees had been provided by the Office of the Attorney General and Ministry of Legal Affairs consistent with its recognition of the Government's duty of transparency under the Freedom of Information Act. This breakdown of fees document was not laid in Parliament nor provided to the Members of Parliament during the Third Session of the Twelfth Parliament. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I take full responsibility for that inadvertent error. I wish to assure the Members of this House, and the Parliament, that this error was neither deliberate nor intended to mislead this honourable House.

I sincerely apologize to this honourable House and to the Member of this inadvertent error on my part, occurring during the Standing Finance Committee meeting in this House on Friday 05 May, 2023. With your leave, I take this opportunity to correct the record of this honourable House; me a culpa.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

Clerk at the Table: Introduction of Bills, the Valuation of Land (Amdt.) Bill, 2023, in the name of the Minister of Finance.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Lee: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I seek clarification, when my colleague on the

other side had told me the order of the debate today would have been the continuation of the borough Bill and then the land and valuation.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: We got it in writing. She did say that. So what is happening?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Leader of the House, you care to clarify?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my friend is correct. It is just that I did not inform the Clerk that that is how we would do it.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Please, please. Leader of the House, please ensure that on other occasions the information is provided.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: I certainly will. It is the first time I have made such a mistake and it will never happen again.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*] Aww.

**MISCELLANEOUS PROVISIONS (ESTABLISHMENT OF THE
BOROUGH OF DIEGO MARTIN AND THE BOROUGH OF SIPARIA)**

BILL, 2021

[*Third Day*]

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on question [April 21, 2023]:

That the Bill be now read a second time.

Question again proposed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I will now call on the Member for Couva North who has 28 minutes continuing of your initial speaking time. Please join the debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3.10 p.m.

Mr. Ravi Ratiram (Couva North): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you most kindly

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for the opportunity to continue this debate on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Establishment of the Borough of Diego Martin and Borough of Siparia) Bill, 2021, which may seem to be at first a very simple piece of draft legislation, but the consequences of which are going to change our local government structure quite possibly for all time.

This is because, while the Bill contains only six clauses that represent a name change and the insertion of that change into five other pieces of written law, in reality it is perhaps one of the most impactful changes to our local government system in several years. The last occasion being under a superior government led by the Member for Siparia then Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I make reference to a newspaper article dated April 2011 by the *Guardian*, that,

“All local government reps to get offices with staff

Local Government Minister Chandresh Sharma says all of its 134 elected officers in both the city and borough corporations throughout T&T will have an office complete with staff and amenities in each of their respective electoral districts.”

This article highlights, and quoting from the statement made by the former Minister of Local Government, hon. Chandresh Sharma:

“Cabinet has given the approval that all 134 local government practitioners will have an office funded by the state, equipped by the state in which staff will be paid and money will be made available for stationery and other

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amenities’.”

That was one of the most meaningful changes that this country had seen in local government for the longest while, because we were governed by a visionary and a compassionate leader, then Prime Minister hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like to spend the first part of my contribution in careful analysis of what was presented to this august House by the mover of the Motion, the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government. It was very disappointing to witness the grand performance of the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, parading his exceptional levels of inexperience and unmatched incompetence before this House.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is of utmost importance that we bring to mind, both for your esteemed self and the multitude of citizens attentively observing the sheer folly that the former Attorney General, the Member for San Fernando West, so brazenly boasted about at the introduction of his presentation.

I am quoting from the *Hansard* dated February 10th, 2023, when this debate started, and I quote:

“Minutes ago in the Court of Appeal we just won the law. The challenge that was brought by the UNC against the Government to try and strike out amendments that we had put in. So we have won. We have won that, Madam Speaker.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: “And the Court of Appeal has agreed with the Government that it was proper to put into effect the four-year term for councillors and

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aldermen as opposed to a three-year term. Thank the Lord God for the independence of our Judiciary.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the premature celebration displayed by the Member for San Fernando West reminds me of the PNM camp on the night of the Barataria by-election, when there was fanfare only to be followed by silence and tears when they recognized that they had lost the Barataria by-election to Sharon Durham-Maharaj and the UNC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the old people “does say hurry dog does eat raw meat”, which means a state of anticipation that could make you act stupidly and prematurely. In responding to what has been said by the Member for San Fernando West, I want to correct the hon. Minister and set the record straight.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, today we say thank the Lord God for the Member for Siparia and the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, the former Attorney General, Anand Ramlogan SC, and the legal team who represented Ravi Balgobin—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

[*Member de Nobriga rises*]

Hon. Member: Nonsense!

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again Members, again Members, there is a procedure with regard to the Standing Order. It has to be identified and then we proceed, again. So Member, I will give you a little leeway, but tie it quickly in to your point with regard to the borough for Siparia and the borough for Diego Martin.

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Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your guidance, as I respond to those who have made contributions prior in this debate, as how debates go in this House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: And as I repeat—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have made my my decision, we move accordingly. Again yes, we may be in the third day of the debate, remember we have tedious repetition so we need to ensure that we stay within the parameters of how we would determine. So, again, I will guide you accordingly. Proceed.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your guidance. As I continue, I say today, we say thank the Lord God for the Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, the former Attorney General, Mr. Anand Ramlogan, and the legal team who represented Ravi Balgobin Maharaj in the matter all the way to the Privy Council.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: They have won. Democracy has triumphed over dictatorship, and the people of this country have defeated the PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Privy Council has ruled that the Government's action were undemocratic and unlawful, and that an election should have been held by March 2023.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: So unlike our hurried, inaccurate colleague—

Mr. Young: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1) this is about the borough of Siparia and

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the borough of Diego Martin. What it has to do with Ravi Balgobin and a Privy Council, and these types of things?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: So again Member, tie it in quickly and let us move on, otherwise if I rise again—

Mr. Young: “De only ting he could tie in is a woman in a room.”

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, once more for your guidance, as I respond to what has been put forward in the debate by the mover of this Motion, the hon. Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, as I wrap up this first point and I say thank the Lord God for the Privy Council.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister asserted that the Bill is about, and I quote what was said by the mover of this Motion:

“Bringing to life the desire of the people of the Regional Corporation of Siparia and the Regional Corporation of Diego Martin.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I implore you to ponder the origin of this profound desire, because clearly this Minister is a stranger to the desire of the people of the regional corporation of Siparia and of the regional corporation of Diego Martin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: I have been in touch with the people of both Siparia and Diego Martin, and I can tell you about their desire. Their desire is for better roads.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Not the pothole-ridden roads they have to traverse every day and visit their mechanic every weekend, because of this “pothole national movement” administration, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The desire of the people of

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Siparia and Diego Martin is for the maintenance of their watercourses, not their drains being overgrown with bushes, resulting in flooding whenever a drizzle is experienced. Whenever rain falls, the San Francique Main Road gets flooded out and becomes a drain, just like High Street, Siparia. Vehicles cannot traverse these roads whenever the rain falls. And they are speaking about borough status? Mr. Deputy Speaker, the people of Siparia and Diego Martin's desire is for jobs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Not for the shutting down of companies which sustained them for years, like the closure of Petrotrin, which was a major employer that also outsourced work to hundreds of contractors, who hired thousands of citizens from the district of the Siparia region.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we turn to the region of Diego Martin, just yesterday it was reported in the *Guardian* newspaper:

“CARIDOC workers served layoff notices”

The article stated, and I quote:

“More than 100 Caribbean Dockyard and Engineering Services Limited...workers staged a protest at the entrance to the Chaguaramas port yesterday...”

Mr. de Nobriga: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1) again. What does CARIDOC workers have to do with borough status? You know very well that is not so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member okay, thank you.

Mr. de Nobriga: Come on.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again Member, I will give you a little leeway. Proceed.

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Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I refer to the desire of the people of Diego Martin as was raised by the Member for San Fernando West. And the people for Diego Martin, just like to people for all of Trinidad and Tobago, are desirable for jobs, because under this PNM, people are losing their jobs every single day.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: And the question is, who is next on the chopping block? As I move on—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And again, Member, every Member—that is probably all other eight Members who would entered the debate—would have talked about employment and jobs. So again move to another point.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for your guidance. As I move on, I say that the desire of the people of Diego Martin and Siparia is for economic activities.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Not for the ghost town that this PNM Administration has turned these regions into. Many businesses had to close their doors due to the mismanagement of the economy by this incompetent administration. Imagine two banks had to close down in Siparia because of the incompetence of this PNM Administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: The people of Siparia and Diego Martin, their desire is for safer communities—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mr. R. Ratiram: —where people are not afraid to leave their homes, and where streets are not bloodstained. Yet now people are even hesitant to be in their home, due to the pervasive occurrence of rampant home invasion being experienced across the lengths and breadth of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: The desire for the people of Siparia is to have a fully operational fire station and not an empty shell with no fire tender available.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the failure of this Government to properly resource the Siparia Fire Station, resulted in the deaths of a mother and a daughter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: And condolences go out to that family, because of this, this Government will never be forgiven by the people of the region of Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: What I can say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the ultimate desire of the people of Diego Martin, Siparia and all of this country, is for them to exercise their democratic right and vote for their local government representative, and I say, “Let the election begin.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I again implore you to ponder the origin of this profound desire of the people of Diego Martin and Siparia, because the hon. Minister spoke about this, and because it is evidently clear that it did not arise from consultation, as emphasized by my esteemed counterpart, the Member of Parliament St. Augustine. For the lamentable truth remains that no consultations

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were undertaken. If the Minister wants to refute this in his winding up, I welcome him to present the specifics of those consultations to this honourable House and to the people of Siparia and Diego Martin.

As of now there is no tangible evidence raised by the Minister, so through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I ask the hon. Minister to provide an account for the comprehensive development studies conducted in relation to the matter at hand. It is imperative to understand the extent to which meticulous analysis and research were employed to inform the decision making process.

Secondly, I ask the hon. Minister to divulge the specific guidelines and criteria that were utilized to arrive at the aforementioned decision. Such information will undoubtedly contribute to a more profound understanding of the rationale behind this Bill.

The Minister said that while there appears to be no distinction between a city, a borough and a regional corporation in the parent Act, there are other dynamics relevant to making the Siparia Regional Corporation and the Diego Martin Regional Corporation boroughs in law. The hon. Minister stated that in the convention and practice there are certain indicators in moving from a town to a borough to a city.

The Minister said that this was considered by two subcommittees. However, from research conducted, these subcommittees that the Minister referred to for the Diego Martin Regional Corporation, it was headed by the Member for Diego Martin North/East, and comprised the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, Minister Allyson West, Sen. Renuka Sagrarsingh-Sooklal, and the Diego Martin Regional Corporation Chairman, Alderman Sigler Jack.

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3.25 p.m.

And for the Siparia Regional Corporation, the subcommittee, it was chaired by the former Sen. Clarence Rambharat and comprised the member for La Brea, the Member for San Fernando East, Minister Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister Kazim Hosein and Alderman Christopher Encinas of the Siparia Regional Corporation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, not even a councillor elected by the burgesses of Diego Martin or Siparia was put into these subcommittees.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: When we look at the chair and the members of this sub-committee it becomes evident that their establishment appears to have been driven by a clear political bias. Why did the Government not see it fit to engage this matter with a select committee of Parliament which comprises of Government, Opposition and Independent Members engaging with stakeholders, where a report would be produced, which would have been made public? Mr. Deputy Speaker, speaking about these subcommittees, the Minister said and I quote:

“...they went through a checklist, and the checklist involved looking at economic indices, looking at geographic, development, looking at density, et cetera. And suffice it to say that the report that came back to the Cabinet was that it was prudent to proceed with the desires of the people of Siparia and the desires of the people of Diego Martin...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, regrettably that is unacceptable and fails—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—to deliver what our citizenry deserves, especially in light of the devastating climate of distrust of people to the Government due to their poor track

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record of good governance, transparency and accountability.

So if you permit me for a moment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to make reference to a piece of research that was also carried out with respect to the items identified by the hon. Member for San Fernando West. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we look at density and the density of the population and we compare all 14 municipalities in Trinidad, Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation has the highest electorate size with 178,841, population size, 214,119, electorate. When we look at Diego Martin, they are only at 102,997, population size. And I ask, why the rush for Diego Martin and for Siparia and neglect Tunapuna? Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is something that you would have welcomed and championed and I look forward to the day when the Tunapuna Regional Corporation will be given proper representation—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—so that consideration can be given to this corporation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we look at the land area in square kilometres, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation is the largest, 927 square kilometres in land space. When we look at Diego Martin, it falls number 10 on the list of municipalities in Trinidad, with only 126 square kilometres and Siparia is number 6,495 square kilometres. So is it true that these indices, or these factors, were really taken into consideration, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Or is there a hidden political bias/motive behind this? Because clearly the factors highlighted here by the mover of this Motion did not take into consideration these issues.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister spoke to the provision of the Bill returning T&T to the cabildo model and devolution of power in terms of autonomy for local

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government. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it follows on the previous point that given the history of the Government's lackadaisical and inefficient manner of making releases available to the regional corporation and the borough corporation, especially those that are UNC and Opposition controlled, the Minister's point on greater autonomy for local government is weak, it is empty and it is very misleading, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister spoke to changes in traffic regulation by the passage of this Bill, and to quote the hon. Minister, he said:

“Pull up and parking are going to be different. The ability to reverse on main roads will be different. The ability to reverse around corners will be different...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, has this Government factored the increased cost to our taxpayers with respect to the publication of respective notices, dissemination of information to burgesses, signage, retraining of Municipal Police, Trinidad and Tobago Police Service officers and traffic wardens and if so, what is that cost going to be, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Is the Government going to supplement the corporation Vote for training or the development programme for the construction and installation of the necessary signage and infrastructure? The Government must come clean and tell the already burdened taxpayers and let them know how much a simple amendment to the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic and Regulations, Chap. 48:50, as per clause 6 of this, is going to cost the pocket of the taxpayers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister said, and I quote again, the:

“...law does not change boundaries, it does not cause gerrymandering...”

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The Minister introduced in the moving of this Motion, the concept of gerrymandering and he is saying to us here:

“...this law does not change boundaries, it does not cause gerrymandering, it does not cause any consequence. Why? Because it is only the Elections and Boundaries Commission, under the Constitution, via their legislation that can do that after data is presented and the report is laid and debated where recommendations of the EBC are had.”

In other words, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have to ask the hon. Minister through you, are you saying Minister, not yet? Let us pass this and then we will start our gerrymandering? Because again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we on this side do not trust this Government, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, do not trust this Government. So when this Government does in fact bring the gerrymander, or in fact, they begin to gerrymander as they attempted to do in the Couva North constituency and the Couva South constituency with the new Couva West/Roystonia seat their motives become evident. But I want to send a loud and clear message, that Couva North, Couva South, Roystonia, Couva West, we are ready for that local government election—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram:—and we will also secure victory for the United National Congress on election day.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister went on to state that in creating borough status, the Government is allowing for the borrowing of experiences, and very importantly, for the obtaining of additional funds and revenue by underwriting loans and providing arrangements. The Minister himself asked, where is that to be

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found? The answer is nowhere, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: —because the Government’s plans and promises about this Local Government reform package that the Minister claims to be operationalizing, is absent and is intangible. None of our existing regional or borough corporations have benefited from these PNM plans.

Most of which, these “Plans Never Materialized”, which is what the PNM stands for.

3.35 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister also said that:

“...moving to borough status, allows the continuation of process...because the evidence will show that corporations do not spend all of their money. They return money to the central government.”

You know, when I heard this, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it hurt my heart deeply. Regrettably, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister, through this, gave an inaccurate, misleading and incomplete picture of what happens in reality, and maybe this is because the Minister is quite out of touch with the reality of what our local government bodies face.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Related to the woeful, insufficient allocation allotted to corporations is the horrible timing in which release are made.

So again, what happens in reality is that the council makes application for funding for various projects, but the delay between the request and the actual receiving the funds is abhorrent. And sometimes it comes so close to the end of the

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financial year that these projects are not able to be operationalized in time and as a result, the moneys have to be returned as unspent balances. This is stifling and suffering the corporations. And converting Siparia and Diego Martin into borough status, it is not going to change the mismanagement and the inefficiencies that this PNM administration is governing local government bodies. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the sad thing is that the Minister knows this and chooses to give a wrong very misleading and lopsided account of what takes place.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: All that talk about:

“...a better spend...”

And I quote:

“...a better spend because there is a better process...”—is very unfortunate, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

It is unfortunately a PNM pie-in-the-sky “mamaguay-ism” that they are trying to push on the citizenry of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the point the Minister made regarding the updating of the vestige as it relates to orphan roads, et cetera, which the Minister himself acknowledged when he said that, and I quote:

“It is far too long that people complain that their areas not being serviced by local government and the answer to that is, unfortunately, because they do not have jurisdiction over it”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is eight years now this PNM administration is in Government, and this Minister wants to behave like he now came into office, the hon. Member for San Fernando West.

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Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, hon. Member, your initial speaking time has now elapsed. You have an additional 15, do you care to available yourself?

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you most kindly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. R. Ratiram: I want to also remind the hon. Minister that apart from these, going forward, the issue of agricultural access roads being put under the remit of the respective local government corporations is something that the Ministry must take into account. This is a most important matter to our farmers, which I will return to later in my contribution, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to take a moment to respond to contributions made by the Member for Arima, the hon. Minister of Planning and Development, who clearly demonstrated in her contribution that this PNM Government does not have a plan. The Member started by saying that this proposed legislation:

“...advances the development of Trinidad and Tobago by bringing democracy, representation and accountability closer to the people...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, through you, I ask the hon. Member, how exactly will this be done? This PNM Government has been notorious for bringing weak and flawed legislation into this Parliament. Were it not for the Opposition to identify these weaknesses and defend the rights of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, I am afraid to think what John Public would have said about this Parliament. It is going on eight years now, through all the legislation brought by this Government to the Parliament and put into law, the people of T&T can tell you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that they are still awaiting accountability from this Government. Because they have spent more than \$400 billion and they have not improved the quality of lives of any

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of the citizens, be it Siparia, be it Diego Martin, or be it any other part of this country.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, Members opposite profess to be part of a Government that says that it is serious about local government reform, but yet we are here to advance legislation that would create history, irreversibly so, by converting two municipalities from regional corporation to borough corporation, and in the absence of promised local government reform. Is that a government that has a plan? Is that a government that knows what it is doing? Mr. Deputy Speaker, given the misleading manifesto produced by this PNM Government, prior the last general government in 2020, the PNM used the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to produce a document entitled “Roadmap for Trinidad and Tobago Post COVID-19 Pandemic”, commonly referred to as the road map to recovery.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, given that that Government plans to convert two municipalities into borough corporation and given their need to force-feed local government reform legislation down the throats of the population, one would have thought that somewhere in this road map document we would have heard mentioned of such a significant change taking place in local government. However, in going through that entire document, I can tell you that I searched high and low and I was amazed to learn that there was no mention whatever to any local government proposal which spoke to the expansionary movement of Diego Martin and Siparia to borough status. Even more amazing was that there was no mention whatsoever of local government reform, but that is another matter for another day.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to be wholly relevant to the debate and the policy behind this Bill, the question is: Where is the vision on the part of this Government

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with respect to this Bill? There seems to be none. Whether it is with respect to consulting with specific civil society groups, or general public, or with respect to giving local government bodies the due consideration of being included in the Government's long-term plan, there is none, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And speaking of plans, vision and forward thinking, can the Minister allude as to whether the Government intends to allocate additional funding to these borough corporation of Diego Martin and Siparia once formed, and if so, when? Is this House going to see such added financial support via another Supplementary Appropriation Bill, or would we be privy once again to PNM financial incompetence and short-sightedness? Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fiscal allocation for local government bodies is not based just on recurring expenditure but on the plans that the corporation executive would have set out and agreed upon. Has the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government engaged at all in any meetings with the councillors and aldermen, in both Diego Martin and Siparia, to obtain feedback as to what plans they may have that require additional funding?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I suspect that another area this PNM Government has failed to consider is that of best practice in treatment of perennial issues, especially those affecting agriculture and food security. At the Diego Martin Regional Corporation, one of the major issues faced over the past couple of years is that of flooding due to the rainy season. As a matter of fact, we are almost into the rainy season and parts of the country are already being flooded out. Is there a plan for flood mitigation, and has this been presented to the Minister, or will this plan be stalled during the process of converting the Diego Martin Regional Corporation to a borough corporation? Where will the priority be?

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You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Bill is not and cannot be about a name change alone. There is a world of policy and planning that goes into the process, which this PNM Government are total strangers to. When we look at international best practice, for instance, I want to draw reference to a document entitled, “Local Government Flood Mitigation & Disaster Planning”, by the New Jersey-based GovPilot firm, a leading company in digital transformation for local government. The report states, and I quote:

“Flooding can cause millions of dollars in damage to your community, and recovery can often take years. To make matters worse, floods are amongst the least predictable types of natural disasters, meaning that even if you have designated flood zones, history doesn’t assure that a previously unscathed area is safe from flooding in the future especially as climate change continues to cause more severe storms and flooding.

As a result, local governments need to take action to protect their physical and IT infrastructure, prepare constituents to react appropriately in the case of a severe flood, and have a response plan in place to move quickly to address damages.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, in Trinidad and Tobago, what has the response of the Diego Martin Regional Corporation been to flooding? Like most other local government bodies, its scope has unfortunately been limited to that of disaster management through the respective DMUs. Is this going to be the same as Diego Martin Regional Corporation transitions to a borough corporation? What about the flood mitigation, flood preparedness and flood recovery measures?

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the point is, in the same way that Government ought

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to see this Bill as more than just a name change, they ought to recognize that many aspects of local government services and support require strengthening if we are to truly be seen as a progressive society serving the interest of Trinidad and Tobago. And if they do not know how to do it, they can set up a meeting with the UNC and we will teach them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. R. Ratiram: Similarly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, within the boundaries of Siparia Regional Corporation, agriculture and farming are major activities. Not only do farmers within the Siparia region suffer from the same problem relating to flooding, they also are seriously affected by the criminal scourge through praedial larceny. I want to underscore the point on the ease of access to public services and whether there will be an increased availability of these. One such service that matters to our farmer is the protection of their crops and themselves.

The praedial larceny unit is overwhelmed and could use every bit of support that it can get. I believe that the municipal police can play a pivotal role in this fight against the criminal element. So, perhaps, Mr. Deputy Speaker, on a related note, it can, and it may be time, for some rethinking of the legislation governing the role and function of the municipal police further to the provision of Act No. 11 of 2021, the Miscellaneous Provisions (Special Reserve Police and Police Complaints Authority) Act of 2021.

Therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I ask that the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, in advancing these two municipalities to borough, is there any intention by the Government to provide additional support to the borough police by way of resourcing and funding?

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Mr. Deputy Speaker, can you advise how much time I have remaining?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You finish at 3.53, so you just have about four minutes—six minutes.

Mr. R. Ratiram: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. As I quickly move on, I want to bring to the hon. Minister's attention what is happening in the Siparia Regional Corporation at this time. You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the corporation took upon themselves to provide a brush cutter allowance and a blower allowance so that the worker of the corporation can be a little more mechanised in executing their responsibility, and they provided a simple \$15 and \$10 for the use of the personal equipment being provided by the employees.

However, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have correspondence here between the CEO of the Siparia Regional Corporation, Chairman of the Corporation, and from the CPO's office, and in summary what this is all about is that the workers of the corporation at this point in time cannot receive that allowance for the use of their brush cutter or their blower. So what local government is doing at this point in time is sending the workers at the Siparia Regional Corporation back to using brushing cutlass and crook stick, and using a cocoyea broom, or you cut a guava branch to sweep the side of the road. They have removed this allowance of using the brush cutter and blower. And we are talking about transforming Siparia Regional Corporation from a regional corporation to borough status, when we are seeing this PNM administration sending us 20 years backwards? That cannot be, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And I am excited, just as I know the burgesses of Siparia and the burgesses of Diego Martin, and the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago are very much excited for the local government elections to demonstrate that the citizens are

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forward-thinking. Just as how those in Tobago were forward-thinking to get rid of this PNM administration, so too all of Trinidad and Tobago will—all of Trinidad will follow.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

3.50 p.m.

So in wrapping up, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I end as I began by saying that from where we stand this name change legislation offers little benefit to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, in particular, the people of Siparia and Diego Martin. There is no guarantee that any of what the Government has promised will translate into better governance or into bringing representation closer to the people. The only way in which this can happen and I can tell you that this is what the people of Siparia and Diego Martin want to see, much like the rest of this country, is for this uncaring and incompetent Government to pack up their bags and leave giving way for a more competent UNC government, led by the best, the most compassionate, the most caring Prime Minister, the Member of Siparia as our Prime Minister. With that being said, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you very much for this opportunity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise particularly in my capacity as Member for Parliament for Diego Martin West. I heard a lot of name calling of Diego Martin from an entrepreneurial from Couva North. I am wondering whether he is intending to do

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business in Diego Martin. I am warning him that he is not welcome.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my colleague from Couva North just amazed me in his written contribution. Had he been speaking, you know, ad libbing I would have said his thoughts were coming to him, you know, in spurts and he did not have a chance to review them. But he was reading a written text and paying obeisance to his leader, as he should, because that what holds him there. But that really had nothing to do with the issue of the elevation of two regions in our country to borough status.

In fact, if there was a word like “illogicity” I would have used it, but it has to do with the abject absence of logic.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And the convenient hypocrisy of what he has said as though he came here from somewhere else. He could not have been in Trinidad and Tobago. The Member for Couva North, I know he is a busy businessman, operating mainly at nights—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter and desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—I do not know how anybody, anybody who has been paying attention to the issue of local government reform in Trinidad and Tobago could come here with a straight face in broad daylight and say that there was no consultation on this matter. If ever an allegation could be made against the intention to reform local government in Trinidad and Tobago it really has to be said that there has been too much consultation and not enough action.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And whether you are NAR, PNM, UNC, whoever, you will know, you must know of the huge amount of consultation that took place under this heading of local government reform. If I speak about the recent past—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 44(8), the contribution made, to clarify—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Ratiram:—the consultation was about converting Siparia and Diego—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right, okay, thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Okay Member! Thank you. Proceed.

Hon. Member: Geez!

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I understand you know. After you come to the podium and talk all kinds of kalinda wash, the first point I am taking issue with I am to be disturbed. I did not disturb you.

Mr. Ratiram: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, no, listen. Members come on. Member for Couva North I am not too sure how much disturbance you would have received but, please, let us do it proper and accordingly, all right. Overruled. Proceed.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: You know what is 44(8)?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was saying that nobody who were serious and who was in Trinidad and Tobago could say that they had not observed some element of the widespread and in-depth consultation that took place and I am

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not even going to go back, way back to the NAR days when Carson Charles was the Minister and when—let me talk about the days when Hazel Manning was the Minister of Local Government. And the work she has done, I do not have the time to go into it. But I am sure the current Minister would have mentioned it and the whole citizenry knows that. Then after that there was a governmental change, a change of government and we had another Minister, Minister Franklin Khan who had the portfolio and he went all over the country meeting all the local government bodies and practitioners and they had discourse. And out of it came volumes of documents which I am sure the Member for Couva North has not read any of it because if he did and he came here this afternoon, he is guilty of a waste of public time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I cannot understand him. You cannot come here and tell me you do not know the volumes of documents that have been generated in detail about how the reformed local government could and—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1), this is not about local government. This is about borough status for Siparia and Diego Martin.

Hon. Members: [*Shouts across the floor and desk thumping*]

Mr. Ratiram: And the consultation that I made reference to for borough status of—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, okay. Members okay, thank you, thank you. Members! Again, on both sides Members will have the opportunity to enter the debate.

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Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members and also as the Speaker in terms of abuse of the Standing Order facility, all right. So again, right, I now recognize the Prime Minister or as he said the Member for Diego Martin West, let us proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my patience is being tried but I am keeping my focus. The consultation was very detailed and it got all the way down to how you elevate the management structures in local government. It was not about what happens with drainage and about agricultural access roads specificity, it was about a management unit, in any part of the country, where the burgesses, burgesses in those areas determine to have a greater involvement in the management of the affairs.

So I heard the most deceitful and irresponsible comparisons being made by the Member for Couva North this evening. The main point he made with some clarity is that Tunapuna is big—

Mr. Charles: I rise on 48(4), when you imputing improper motives, talking about deceitful because we are not, we are not hon. [*Inaudible*] Members. We are hon. Members, none of us are deceitful.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, thank you. Okay, again, hon. Prime Minister could you find a different word?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Couva North came here and made a major contribution that Tunapuna should have been on the list for borough status as part of local government reform because Tunapuna is large, it has 200,000 people and so on and so on. I want to ask him a question through you,

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Mr. Deputy Speaker, when in October 1990, Chaguanas was made a borough has Tunapuna grown since then, or was Tunapuna the same size physically and had almost the same population in relation to Chaguanas and Chaguanas was made a borough? It is not on the physical geographical size that the borough status was given to Chaguanas. And then if you go to the other extreme, Point Fortin is one of the smallest boroughs in the country and I think the people of Point Fortin are very proud of their borough status and they defend their borough and it has nothing to do with their physical geographical style. The Member just wasted the time of Parliament trying to make a discourse that fell completely flat.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Made no sense whatsoever. It is not the size—and he went as far as to say Diego Martin small and we are pushing Diego Martin for some kind of political—let me tell you something Diego Martin is one of the largest population centres in this country with the highest amount of residential entities and the people of Diego Martin through their representatives voted and asked for borough status and they will get it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The borough status, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is an elevation of a management structure on the totem pole of management. That is why the people of Arima, going back to colonial days got their borough status, is the royal borough of Arima. And if you know anybody who are Gens Arime you will know what it means to live in the royal borough of Arima.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And it is not based on the physical geographical size of how

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many people in there, it is a community identification of its cultural and other aspects and it brings with it a certain amount of ownership of management and we are saying we can build on that with that and greater autonomy including fiscal strength and greater responsibility. How come, how come, if borough status is of no value in the scheme of things, how come you accepted it in Point Fortin and in Chaguanas without let or hindrance. Why is it now a problem that if Diego Martin is now going to be given that opportunity for greater management, greater identification, for all the good reasons, why you have to come here today and come and tell us that the Government is up to something nefarious with Diego Martin.

I will tell you something that is strange though, the UNC-led Corporation in Siparia voted to assent to borough status and the next thing I knew efforts were made to get them to change their vote. I do not know that they have done so, but I do know for a fact that efforts have been made to get the Siparia people to resile from what they had said they would support. That will not surprise anybody because that is the UNC style. But I can tell you that—I can tell you that the Diego Martin people voted as well for their status to be changed to borough status. And that is why—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And that is why—

Mr. Ratiram: I rise on Standing Order 48(6), is this another repeat of email gate?

Hon. Members: What!

Mr. Ratiram: Can the Prime Minister—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, Member, Member—

Mr. Ratiram: [*Crosstalk*]

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Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you, thank you Member. Listen, Member for Couva North, all right—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Ratiram: I just want to—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Listen. Member for Couva North, right, in terms of abuse of Standing Order if I have to get up on my legs for any particular Standing Order that is not relevant—I am speaking! Overruled, proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will not be put off by the Member for Couva North. I simply want to say that what the Member has put on the *Hansard* this evening has no bearing on the assignment in front of us and I simply ask my colleagues to disregard what he has said. Because you see if I am to go back to the question of consultation, even after the legislation was passed in the House where everybody knows that the Bill went to a Joint Select Committee for Parliamentary treatment, whether you agree or did not agree—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—whether you agree or did not agree, right, whether you agree or did not agree, that Bill came to this House and it passed through the relevant debates in this House and you expressed yourself to it. And like everything else, like everything else we could not count on any support for any forward motion from our colleagues on the other side. I mean I have been here for eight years as Prime Minister I cannot think of—maybe one or two, I do not know, I cannot think of anything that we brought to the House and you came here and say, well the Opposition also supports it.

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Mr. Charles: We have plenty. We have a list.

4.05 p.m.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I cannot remember.

Hon. Member: You have a list.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I have a list. I am sure that you have will also have child marriage in it that we had to bring—

Hon. Members: Ooooooh.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: You voted for it after we bring—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1).

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*] [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Charles: I rise on 48(1). Child marriage has nothing to do with the two institutions that we are looking at today.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right. Okay. Overruled.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will not be distracted. Right? I will not be distracted. The Member talks about being ambushed by the Government, where the Government has ulterior motives with this. I want to put on record, there is no ulterior motive. We have worked on this for years. We have worked on it for months and for weeks.

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise once more on Standing Order 44(8). At no time did I use “ambush”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Ratiram: What the Prime Minister is saying at this time, he is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member. Member. Member, I am not sure if the reference was you, but I am not going to entertain you again. All right? This is about the sixth time. I am taking notes. All right? Please. Overruled. Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am appalled—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—that the Member could come here this afternoon and speak about all the things that are not happening in local government, from the most menial to the major, and none of it has any solution other than call the election. And it makes me want to ask: Is it that after the election day of the next election all these problems that you “cyah cut de grass, you cyah fix pothole, you cyah fix a drain”, you have no authority to do certain things, you have no set revenue stream, you have nothing to make any change, and the day after election, regardless of how the results go, that everything will change? Is that what Members are saying? Because all they seem to be interested in is election day. But we of the PNM, we are seeing election as a choice that the electorate has and you only have one vote.

But what we are also seeing is the opportunity for a new and modernized structure, where the issues that plague you can be influenced positively by a new arrangement of a modern local government arrangement in Trinidad and Tobago for all the people in Trinidad. And we are saying to you, we need to learn from the progress that has been made in Tobago for the last four decades, where greater

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autonomy, including a revenue stream at source at local level has given the practitioners the opportunity, the opportunity, to manage their affairs in a closer way. He asked the question: how is this going to be funded; how is that going to be funded? One of the ways of it being funded is to agree to ensure that those who will benefit from the new arrangement will contribute to it by way of property tax.

We know you do not support it, we know you do not support it, but the bottom line is how else do you make the change? And we have also said that the central government's contribution—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, if I am not going to be speaking in silence, I might as well not try because “stick break in dey ears”. But their behaviour in this House is now making it difficult to participate in any debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I will not be distracted from what I have to say.

Mr. Ratiram: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(4) please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Hon. Member. Hon. Member, listen. Hon. Member, I am not going to rise again with regard to Couva North. Overruled. Proceed.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, a new tool seems to have been discovered, and I am saying to this House this is not how the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago is to set out to serve the people. I am not speaking to them. I am speaking to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I simply seek your protection and I trust that I have it.

Local government reform, as envisaged by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, requires that the community assume a greater responsibility for a number

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of their things that contribute to the quality of life in the district, whether it is an urban district or a rural district. One of the important things in there, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is who serves in local government; for how long and with what authority; and, of course, how will local government fund itself from source and also how will it use the additional revenues that central government will put to local government? Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of the things that has to happen for an improvement in the performance of local government is a modernized management structure. And in the current local government reform exercise this has been discussed in detail and some of the changes that have to be made cannot be made overnight.

Some of it has to be transitionally. Some of it has to be involved technical skills and professional skills which are not now available in local government, but which will have to come. And I am not even speaking about digital technology. I am talking about things like accountants, engineers, planners and so on. These are the kinds of skills that are going to be required to bring that management structure in local government, and people who support it and fund it will be required to hold their elected representatives more responsible because there are more things to be done and you can measure. He made reference to Tobago. One of the bright lights in Tobago was that people in Tobago were able to hold their assemblymen accountable, and if they were dissatisfied they voted in the context of that dissatisfaction against performance. So local government has the potential to improve if you set out on a pathway to make substantial and relevant, and meaningful changes.

Unfortunately, what I am hearing from my colleagues on the other side is

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leave it so. But, of course, while they are saying leave it so, they have a plethora of complaints about how local government in 2022 and 2023 is not delivering. If it is not delivering, then clearly one can identify shortcomings and try to address those shortcomings. And what this Government is guilty of is that we have identified those shortcomings, we have advanced solutions to them which should bring beneficial results, and we cannot convince our colleagues on the other side to support it. Maybe they have some secret arrangements that will come the day after the election. But the bottom line is, I have seen nothing advanced to say that this is what the UNC will do in local government. And, of course, a lot of the complaints that passes under the local government umbrella for some of the practitioners are really central government responsibilities or they are local government responsibilities that are not being carried out, but politically they hold central government responsible.

I cannot understand Mr. Deputy Speaker, how a semi-urban area, like Penal/Debe, could come and tell the country, we “can’t” collect garbage because we “don’t” have diesel to put in our vehicle. Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, young people “can’t” play on the designated sports ground because the grass has not been cut because Sangre Grande Regional Corporation does not have the capacity to cut grass on the playing field. Now if that is the level of local government delivery, then surely something is radically wrong. That does not happen in Tobago. You know why? Because the Tobago House of Assembly can afford to cut grass any day of the week because they have a revenue stream.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And as you go into the borough status, what the borough

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status is supposed to bring is better management, and I am not going to divorce borough status from local government reform. It is an integral part of local government reform.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: That is why the people of Diego Martin asked for it and voted for it in their corporation. There was debate in the corporation. I am not even sure if my colleagues on their side pay any attention to the debate that took place in Siparia Regional Corporation, but I paid attention to the debate in the Diego Martin Regional Corporation. You see you all feel you own the votes of people in Siparia. I do not own the votes in Diego Martin.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I rely on the people to stand in and participate and we come with something participatory, and this Government will support it. We are supporting it and we are asking you to support it. It is local government reform.

When I as Prime Minister invited the heads of all local government bodies in Trinidad to come for a consultation and discussion on the operationalization of local government when it had been moved from a Bill to an Act, my colleague from Siparia told all her followers do not attend, and then today you have the gall to come here and talk about no consultation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So you deliberately stayed away from discussions on local government reform, operationalizing a law that has been passed. So you do not want to know what is involved. You do not want to know how the law will apply. You want to remain in ignorance, but you come to the Parliament and waste

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my time to listen to that cacophony you made this afternoon.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker—I did not go because I was incapacitated, but it took place.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: It took place and—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Face the Chair please, Mr. Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The ban on the persons participating took place before I was incapacitated. But the bottom line is this. The reason that was given that they should not attend is that if you go the Prime Minister will bouff you.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: He say Faris.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Not that they had something to query or to add. Because civilized people should be able to communicate. You have a different point of view for sure, but I think on a one on one—My colleague from Pointe-a-Pierre would want to see—yes, you are my colleague, surprisingly. You know this is where the population talks about the Government and the Opposition should come together. There was no greater coming together than that consultation that was going to take place after the Bill was passed. Even though the Opposition did not support it in the Parliament, but the majority in the Parliament voted for it—that is our system—it is going to become law.

Why would you want to stay away from understanding how it is going to work? And I keep maintaining that some of the statements made by Opposition Members and the behaviour of Members can only come from people who come in

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unprepared, they do not read anything, they do not listen to anybody but themselves, and they are completely at-sea about what is happening in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And they believe that all they have to do is to denigrate individuals, and if we do that sufficiently you will then win the next election.

Mr. Charles: They have licence.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Mr. Deputy Speaker, they said confession is good for the soul.

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

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I always knew he had verbal diarrhoea. I do not know what the actual complaint was. Thanks for telling me. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I know that I should not spend much time here this afternoon trying to convince MPs in Trinidad and Tobago that local government reform, borough status, management of local issues at the ground level in communities is something beneficial to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I know that, and, therefore, it is difficult to understand the basis of the objections, expect to try to say that the Government has done nothing good. But this Government has seen problems in this country—whatever they are—and has systematically set out to commit itself to rectifying those problems.

Today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we heard my colleague from Couva South speak to the profitability of Heritage. That was a problem just like local government, but we fixed it. And because we have fixed it, the people of Trinidad

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and Tobago are now better off than when we started.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Very frequently there are other examples we can point to, but I do not want to be accused of going off the debate but that is for another time. That is for another time.

4.20 p.m.

But the bottom line is, if we stay with local government, the question we have to ask is: How far are we prepared to go to change the status quo? If the status quo is not to be changed, then all the election will do is create a longer period of complaint and misrepresentation hoping to stay where you are. If on the other hand, the situation is that we can make changes for the better, then I invite my colleagues on board to accept what the corporations have said they want to do, Siparia and Diego Martin. Have borough status, see it in the context of improved management of the districts and encourage people to take ownership of their districts and to participate more fully in governmental activities in Trinidad and Tobago, whether it is a borough, in the city, or in a rural corporation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to say no more on this matter, except to commit myself to ensuring that we do whatever can be done under the laws of Trinidad and Tobago to improve the local government delivery in this country because it will contribute to an improvement in the quality of life of all our citizens.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as I join in the debate in this honourable House. And I am happy that the

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hon. Prime Minister took time to come off the golf course and come into Parliament.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: “And he leaving. He fraid. He fraid”.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am very happy. Because, you see, the Prime Minister does not seem to know which Bill is being debated in the House today. He said some people do not read and they do not know anything happening at large in the country, when the hon. Member for Diego Martin West today demonstrated he does not even know which Bill is being debated in the House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: He does not read.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: He does not read. And on top of all of that, he just does not care. That is the more fundamental issue, listening to that diatribe for the past how long it was.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The hon. Member talked about this side never supporting any Bills—we have the list, you know. He talked about property tax. I want to remind him—

Mr. Young: “Yuh geh this from Nicholas?”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Not from Nicholas, I got it from the honourable MP, Saddam Hosein—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, again—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—who will become senior counsel.

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Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members, Members. Members, I recognize the Member for Siparia and again, let us listen in silence.

Mr. Charles: True leader.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Number 57.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, I have ruled. Please let us address the Chair.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]—such a pleasant person. I thank you. I am guided. I am guided, thank you. And so the Prime Minister told us property tax and we are against property tax. We are against it for a reason because now is not the time in T&T, with the suffering that is happening, to impose this property tax. It is not the time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And just like the Prime Minister forgot this big consultation he is talking about and we did not attend, the Prime Minister himself did not attend his own consultation.

Mr. Charles: Tell him.

Hon. Member: Tell him.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Let me remind him, talking about property tax, December 20, 2009, *Newsday*:

“Rowley hits property tax”

Hon. Members: What?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:

“Diego Martin West MP Dr Keith Rowley believes that people from all

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walks of life are angry at the Government's property tax..."

Hon. Member: What? No way.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That is exactly what is happening today.

"...from all walks of life..."

"...Government's property tax...they blame on the squandermania. Rowley was speaking...in the Lower House..."

"He said..."—and I quote—"In my constituency, there is anger, anxiety, resentment, at both ends of the spectrum."

"...he advised the Government. He said they have brought the tax at the worst possible time, alluding to tough economic times. He repeatedly said that people were not against the idea of paying taxes but were upset that this measure could have been averted if the Government had acted differently..."

What is different now? People are suffering even more than then coming out of the pandemic.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Loss of jobs. Loss of opportunities for jobs, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And so the Member for Diego Martin West spent his time really misleading this House and I will just do in seriatim a few of the issues raised by the Member.

The Member repeatedly talked about local government reform. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am sure that you are well aware that is another Bill completely, totally another Bill.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That is not the Bill before this House today.

Mr. Charles: Irrelevant.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It is irrelevant to this debate. Today the Bill is Bill No. 8 of 2021, which is merely to make a name change to the municipalities of Siparia and Diego Martin from regional corporations to boroughs. That is all that was here.

The Member went way back to the NAR days. Let me remind him of the NAR days because they did a comprehensive local government package. Comprehensive.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In 1990, given the size of the various corporations and so on, the number, the electorate, the population density and other factors, the NAR passed in the Parliament, then in 1990, a Bill for an Act for—the Municipal Corporations Act where they created 18 municipalities—18. As soon as the PNM came into office in 1992, they repealed that, they removed the 18 boroughs and corporations and so on—regional corporations, boroughs, cities. And did what? Reduce it down to 14.

So today when you talk about land mass and you talk about Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, racing across the country, from way down in Couva, up to all the way Talparo; you talk about Tunapuna Regional Corporation, huge corporation; San Juan/Laventille, huge corporation, the PNM saw it as a dagger in their heart because that would have given a more equitable distribution of electorate and equality in that region.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So going back to the NAR time, they did comprehensive law and you amended it to suit your own political agenda.

The hon. Member, again, talked about the royal Borough of Arima. Anybody knows of a royal Borough of Arima?

Hon. Member: No.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Obviously, the Prime Minister does not understand. There is no royal borough of Arima. There is a royal charter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They were created by a royal charter. So it is not the royal Borough of Arima. Ask the Member for Arima, I think she was the Chairman up there and could really help educate the Prime Minister on this matter.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mayor.

Mrs. K Persad-Bissessar SC: Mayor. Well, Mayor includes Chairman, in case you did not know, under the law. Mayor includes Chairman.

Mr. Charles: Teach them, teach them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Section, what is it?—11 or something. Mayor includes Chairman. Interpretation section, Mayor includes Chairman, and that is an important point.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Address the Chair, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Because the only thing that is going to happen with this Bill is that when you change the name, instead of a Chairman of a corporation, they are going to be called Mayor.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: That is the only tangible change from this Bill.

Mr. Charles: Teach them.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Prime Minister tells us the Bill went to a JSC. Which Bill, again? Totally misrepresenting what happened. This Bill never went to a JSC. Never.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Prime Minister talked about Bills we supported and did not support, and child marriage Bill and so on. Look, I have the list here, but I will leave it for another day because I really want to get back to the meat at hand, the matter at hand, and to demonstrate that at the end of this day and at the end of the debate in the Senate, nothing would have brought any tangible benefits to the people of Siparia and to the people of Diego Martin as a result of this name change Bill.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Prime Minister spoke about how a borough would help us. Nothing did the Prime Minister say, Diego Martin West, not a word about what benefits we will get from this Bill. So here we are here today, here we are, when we are dealing with this Bill, as we discuss the merits and demerits of it, we are doing so at a time of chaos and uncertainty in the local government system. As we discuss the merits and demerits of the proposed legislation before us, our local government reps from both sides of the political divide, they are in a state of limbo. And when the Prime Minister made the statement—I did ask that question for a reason because the statement that he gave took us up to date of the Privy Council's decision, but not a word about post-Privy

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Council decision. What is the status? They are in limbo, whether they be from Siparia, whether it be from Diego Martin, and throughout the system.

So as we come to make this amendment to change the status of the Siparia and the other one, the hon. Member for San Fernando West in piloting the Bill—again, the only way I can do this is to go through with what the hon. Member said because I do not want to stray from relevance. We are not debating the local government reform Bill. That was done and passed in this House by some Members. Today we are debating the name change for these two corporations.

At page 24 of the *Hansard* which records the contribution of the Member for San Fernando West, the Member said:

“...local government reform must be a feature of our independent and Republican country.”

All highfalutin words, very lofty words, this Member is very used to coming with sounding really grand and great. But if you are so concerned about local government reform as a feature of independent T&T, why do you not give local government the constitutional protection that they need—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —rather than leave it to a Government who will use a simple majority to postpone elections, as you did, and then you were overruled by the Privy Council? On three occasions, the PNM has done this; use local government to deprive people of their right to go to the vote.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Hon. Member told us, shame on you, and I will come back to that in a moment. You know, for us in the UNC, the Prime Minister

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told us today, they said all we want is an election date, all we want is an election date, and therefore what will happen, what will change. Well, I will tell you, everything will change, everything will change.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When you are voted out, everything will change. We were there once, we have a track record and we can do it again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Hon. Member, at page 24 of the *Hansard*, San Fernando West:

“...this Bill articulates around several amendments...”

—again, the language, you know.

“...articulates around several amendments to the Municipal Corporations Act which we passed...and which we partially proclaimed.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Privy Council found that the manner in which you are expected to proclaim law to extend the terms of councillors and aldermen was wrong, so you left us in this state of legal confusion.

The Member continued:

“We partially proclaimed recent amendments and specifically, in giving ourselves time for local government reform which is what this conversion to borough status is...”

Yet, about months later, almost half of the extra year that the Government gave itself to bring and to implement the local government reform, up to today, nothing has been done. Nothing. The Prime Minister is speaking of it all the time, Minister all the time, local government reform, local government reform. Name

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me one tangible thing that has been done.

Hon. Members: Nothing. [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Nothing has been done.

You proclaimed the procurement law, fully proclaimed, eh, which now means that all these corporations, including Siparia and Diego Martin, all these corporations, they have to have procurement officers and—nothing has been put in place. So whilst it is that the Central Tenders Board Act is being amended here under this borough status Bill, amendment today, CTB Act which says that anything started under the CTB will continue, that is what the procurement Act tells, and CTB is here amended so it now includes that they will have purview, jurisdiction over the borough now of Siparia and borough of Diego Martin, previously—name change again. What is in a name? All of it is merely cosmetic, name changing.

So in the procurement issues, having the CTB there, not a single thing can happen in terms of goods and services in this new borough of Siparia and new borough of Diego Martin, because you do not have officers. And every contractor has to apply to the procurement regulator, they have to register, so everything is at a standstill. For two reasons: one is that full implementation of the procurement but no implementation of what is needed for that reform with the procurement law. And the second is that the local government practitioners, apart from the mayors and chairmen, they are defunct, they expired, they retired on the 3rd of December last year and therefore cannot function.

A lot work has to be done by committees of the councils and the hon. Attorney General, you know—the hon. former Attorney General, there is a kind of

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malaise taking place, a kind of pattern of behaviour, where Ministers are going to court swearing witness statements, witness affidavits, and not speaking the truth. Not speaking the truth. We all know the famous one in the Miami court but in this very case that the hon. Member of San Fernando West—thank God for the Judiciary. And it is in *Hansard*, I could give you the page number so that I can respond to it, that Privy Council ruling.

When they went to court, the Minister—

4.35 p.m.

Mr. Young: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(6), identifying a Member of Parliament and imputing improper motives to him, and saying somebody is not swearing, right, 48(6).

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again—

Hon. Member: That is 48(1), Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, okay. Hon. Member again, you said you are quoting from *Hansard*, or you going on to a different document now?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No, I am giving the affidavit evidence from the court.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With regard to—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker:—with regard to the Privy Council ruling?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes Sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, again, I will not allow you to go down on that particular aspect.

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Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Okay, well I will go back to the *Hansard* and continue—

Hon. Member: Yes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—why.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Because I know you were quoting from the *Hansard* all the time so again, right so I will—Members, Members, Members. Members, I have ruled, proceed.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I thank you very much.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am recognizing Siparia. Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am guided, and I am saying, in the *Hansard*, the hon. Member said that they partially proclaimed recent amendments, giving themselves time for local government reform. And I was raising the point that in spite of almost six months, what has been done? It is correct at a press conference in November, the Minister announced the postponement of the election, indicating that they intended to drop a schedule of activities to route reform. The Minister—we were informed—and this was also repeated at the monthly meeting of Ministry Chairman, and practitioners and so on, again no sight of the schedule.

Hon. Member: Nothing.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: As an editorial pointed out today, I think today or yesterday, or early in the week that during the Privy Council hearings, counsel for Government made it clear that the reason for delay in holding elections was to give Government enough time to rollout the full complement of legislative amendments. And the question says it is very curious therefore, halfway through that year which they set themselves, they have yet to implement even one, one of

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those promises.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So when the hon. Prime Minister comes here today and talks about Local Government reform, and Local Government reform, where is the schedule? Local Government reform, page 37 by San Fernando West is being aggressively implemented—

Mr. Charles: [*Laughs*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—aggressively. Where is the schedule for the rollout of this package? Has anything been communicated to the corporations?

Mr. Charles: Aggressively.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They have done nothing since they postponed election. Then at paragraph 24, I quote from the *Hansard* of the hon. Member:

“Minutes ago in the Court of Appeal we just won the law. The challenge that was brought by the UNC against the Government to try and strike out amendments...”

It is in the *Hansard*, you want a copy of *Hansard*?

Mr. Al-Rawi: I rise on Standing Order—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Page 24—

Mr. Al-Rawi: I rise on Standing Order 55(1)(b), that two other speakers speak on this already.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members.

Mr. Al-Rawi: Certainly Couva North you just read that all out.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member I have given you some leeway. I gave you

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some leeway, tie it in. As we say with regard to, it is not Local Government we dealing with but the two boroughs.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So boasting that they won the challenge against the Government, to try and strike out amendments. That is totally not true, there was no application in the court that Minister was speaking about, to strike out any amendments known. It is untrue and we must correct the record.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It is untrue. And you all come here and you hear of untruths all the time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: Forgive him Lord. Forgive him.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Nothing was to strikeout amendments. Before the court it was an interpretation that was asked for about whether that section applied to the incumbents. That is what was before and today the hon. Prime Minister got it right—which is a little unusual—he got that point right. It was an interpretation, it was not a strike out application at all. So I want to correct the record on that matter.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: No wonder he got demoted.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Right so here we are with this entire—whether there was consultation or no consultation, again the hon. Prime Minister misled this Parliament in my respectful view, when he said there was widespread consultation going back from 1990 onto NAR and way back when. No, no, no,

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those had nothing to do borough status and the name of a borough.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Nothing whatsoever to do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Nothing. Then the hon. Member told us at page 28 of the *Hansard* that these two corporations, Member for Couva North mentioned that the Member talked about the desire of the people of Siparia, and the desire of the people of Diego Martin. I am not going into that detail about the desire. But again, I want to correct the record about what the Minister has put into this record. That here it is that the people of Siparia passed this resolution, the UNC councillors have passed this resolution. The Prime Minister came today and tried to say that we or somebody, was asking them to change their vote, nothing of this sort has happened. Nothing has happened. That was totally untrue.

Mr. Charles: Old talk.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And therefore, to say that these resolutions passed by the previous—they were passed by a previous council, they were passed in 2019.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The terms of those councillors ended in December 2019 when the elections were called. It was a previous council that passed them. That election date was 11th October, 2019, and these resolutions the Member gave they do not date, they were passed in 2020. And I want to reaffirm, they were passed 21st—the Siparia Regional Corporation, 21st January, and the other ones were passed thereafter. Now, the Minister talked about consultation, and Prime

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Minister again, he said the first point is consultation.

When you look at the minutes of a meeting held in the Siparia Regional Corporation on February 6, 2019, this is after the Motions were passed. This Motion, these meetings, the PS came, the former Minister came down, all the councillors and aldermen, they were all present on that day, Monday 20th September, 2021, called him upon the Motion at the Siparia Regional Corporation. And this is what those councillors had to say on the 20th September, 2021, they made it very clear, listen Alderman Chanardayen Ramandharsingh indicated that the Motion was moved in 2019, there was no information communicated to members of the council, they were not enlightened of same previously. Whether the Motion was still valid councillor Javed Mohammed informed that there were four new members of council. Four new members of the then council, which had nothing to do with the previous Motion. They would not have any information whatsoever in this matter.

So when you want to talk about elected representative Siparia, who now you are saying voted for this as their desire, the councillors are telling us for themselves, four new members. They had not given any documentation, and he said he represented burgesses and reportedly this matter just appeared. Alderman Ramsingh again informed the corporation did not receive any correspondence informing or updating about this matter. Alderman Christine Neptune questioned why this particular Motion was a concern, and why it seems as though it was shoved down throat of the council. Councillor Deryck Bowrin, raised concerns, timeframe for implementation, funding to chase physical assets with the new name, change in boundaries, and so that meeting continued. Councillor Doodnath

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Mayrhoo, informed that there was a need for dialogue with the burgesses.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And how change would affect same both negatively and positively. And it continues the Minister there, I will move on the point. So on the issue of consultation, I want to say they are very, very mistaken. No consultation with the burgesses or you call them, what do you call them then I am told when you are in a borough you are called burgesses, when you are in a city you are called citizens, when you are regional corporation you are called what, residents or electorate? Electorate, electorate.

Hon. Members: Electorate.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So no consultation with the electorate and then you are telling me, you come here and you are tell us—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—you set up committees, ministerial committees, my colleague mentioned it, talked about it, Couva North. This committees you could not find one Opposition member to sit on the Committee, not one.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: Shame.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Not one. Then you want to feel you consulted. We have a Chairman, a UNC Chairman there, you had these committees. We do not know what they did or did not do. I think the Member has a nice way of saying it, that these intimacy committees were set up, to what investigate or prosecute or persecute words to that effect. Again, no Opposition MP's were in this cabinet things, cabinet. So the process of this thing appears to be the genesis, appears to

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mean these Motions moved by a PNM alderman in a last—in now a defunct, Siparia Regional Corporation. Thereafter this ministerial committee was set up and they leave out the whole UNC out of it, which is the controlling votes inside of the Siparia Regional Corporation in the council.

4.45 p.m.

But what did they do? In Siparia, they came and they picked up the one PNM alderman to do this inter-ministerial meeting; himself to himself. So, do not come to this Parliament and misrepresent and tell people you consulted the people of Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You did not. You did not consult Siparia. So, the Member said they investigated. Here is his wording, investigated and interrogated the subcommittee. What did they investigate and interrogate? And whom did they investigate and interrogate, as I say, having left out all the people?

At paragraph 26—give me a time check please—we see that the corporation, the Member for San Fernando West, he says:

“...a corporation, a borough and a town, a city are all in fact all municipal corporations...”

So, whichever one—that is what I was telling the Member for Arouca/Maloney a little while ago, whether it is a borough or whichever, they are all under the Act municipal corporations. And that is correct. The Minister did say that. But, according to the Judicial Committee, the UK’s Privy Council Office, this is different from the Privy Council, their definition, their website says:

“The conferring of Borough Status is purely honorific.”

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Like an honour. It is an honour.

“The District Council becomes a Borough Council and as a result the District Council Chairman and Deputy Chairman may style themselves Mayor and Deputy Mayor. The change in status had no impact on the functions or responsibilities of the local council.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No impact whatsoever. None whatsoever.

The Minister—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Five minutes? The Minister then in 27 says:

But there are consequential amendments.

Trying to use those words to show us that look, there are some changes. When it comes to changes, we know. I will come back to those in clauses 4 and 5 to see what those are. The Minister said 27, again in this really lofty language:

“...the Government has an obligation to make laws for the peace, order and good government of its society pursuant to section 53 of the Constitution.”

And today we stand here with that capacity to amend the laws that we do. Which part of this law, in this Bill, which part of it is going to bring good governance to Trinidad and Tobago? What part of it? What part of this will bring peace? What part of it will bring good governance? What in this Bill will allow for peace, when you see all the killing, the home invasions, the crime, and so on. When you talk about good governance tell me and show me where in this change of name; this is a change of name Bill, you know.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Nothing has changed. Tell me what else is this? How is this going to benefit the people of Siparia and the people of Diego Martin?

So, all the nice language, but even the Prime Minister today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, could not name one benefit of this borough change of name. That one. He talked about community identification; and that is where he quoted the Arima, the Royal Arima; wrongly quoted about the name. He talked about that and he kept saying community identification. Hey, where in this Bill is that community identification if you change from regional corporation to borough? I keep making that point, because that to me is the key issue in this entire debate in changing the name. Look, I have nothing against anything that would bring benefit to the people of Diego Martin, Siparia, and indeed all of Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, the Member understands, you know, that this name change is really merely just a name change. Because at page 28 in the *Hansard* he talks about certain indicators moving from a town to a borough, to a city and did not tell us what these indicators are. And, indeed, in his winding up he may care to share some of these indicators.

In clause 6 of the Bill, at paragraph 24 the Minister says, page 28 of the *Hansard*. In clause 6 we talk about whether you can reverse, how you park, indicators, et cetera. And you would see that in clause 6 of the Bill. So, he just jumped it there and moved on. But I will come back to that. Let us see what this traffic thing, these amendments, what are they going to actually do.

The Minister talked about 33 years away from the last creation of a borough, page 28, by way of local, economic development. Again, what is the source of this data? What is the data? By way of comparison with the EBC? There is no change

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with the EBC. You told us no boundary changes. You told us the same number of councillors will remain, the same number of aldermen will remain. So, nothing is changing in the EBC. Even though you are amending the RPA, the Representation of the People Act, you are amending, but all you are amending to do is put in the new name. Nothing changes. Boundaries the same, electorate the same. The number of aldermen, four. The number of councillors elected, four, remains the same. So, RPA amendment here does not change the price of cocoa. Nothing changes, only the name.

The Member told us about significant growth, and so on. I think my colleague spoke a bit about that, and I would not go down that line. But just remember the Tunapuna Corporation, as you well know, has an airport; one of the best airports in the Caribbean.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In terms of Siparia, the Member talked.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Look, look, you will have your chance and you when you stand up and talk, we may listen to you. So, if you have a point of order, please feel free to raise it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So just bawling shame is not going to help you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No, I am not going to shut up. [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, no. Member.

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*].

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, Member for Siparia, rest assured you will be protected. Member. Please! Rest assured, you will be protected. But please, let us do it in a nice fashion with the decorum, please?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Oh yes, your initial speaking time has elapsed. You have an additional 15. You care to avail yourself?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I thank you very much, Sir.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right. Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Okay. So, let us talk about these other changes, and whether that is going to benefit the people. The Minister told us we have to look at the amendments to the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Regulations. What does that tell us? What changes are there going to be, now that we are going to call these places a borough? What is the change there for motor vehicle? It tells us things about reversing. It tells us about where you could park, where you cannot park. Tell me how any of that is going to have the traffic congestion in Diego Martin and in Siparia? Tell me about it. So, we have clause 5, Third Schedule amendments, and so on.

And we come to the Motor Vehicle Act. Listen what it is that is the benefit from the amendments to this Act as consequential amendments here. The borough of Diego Martin, name change, name changes. Regulation 2 is amended. Municipal area means the boroughs, and so on. Regulation 29 is amended as follows:

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“Notwithstanding the provisions of Regulation 28...a motor vehicle when stationary at night within the boundaries of”—these boroughs now, which will include these two—“need not show two lights in front and at least two lamps at the back if all the following conditions are complied...”

Mr. Charles: Big change.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Big change. How is this going to help traffic congestion? The conditions are:

- “(a) if such vehicle is drawn up as close as possible to its left or near side of the road;
- (b) if there is affixed or painted on the rear of the vehicle, a reflective material or substance that is easily visible.”

Regulation 30: It is amended as follows:

“He shall not cause the motor vehicle to travel backwards for a greater distance or time than may be requisite for the safety or convenience of the occupants of the motor vehicle.”

How is this going to help the quality of life and the traffic? Because, look at Port of Spain, which is a city, has the same traffic regulations. And what happens in Port of Spain? Gridlock, gridlock jam. We change it into a borough, then it is not going to help anyone.

“The driver of a public service vehicle shall comply with the following regulations:

“...he shall not”—in these cities and boroughs, and so on—“draw up his omnibus on a road other than at a public stand appointed under the Act”

So, all these takeaways are really consequential amendments that will not impact

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or benefit the residents, citizens, in those places.

Mr. Charles: Waste of time.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We talk about amendments, Sir with respect to the Markets and Abattoirs Act. What are we doing? Do you know what is the amendment? Now, that you are going to be called a borough, you cannot sell fish or meat in an open space. What about all those Diego Martin fishermen? What about all of them? What about all our fisherman down in Cedros, down in Quinam, down in Los Iros, wherever it would be, in Siparia, where? What is going to happen? You cannot sell. Now that you are a borough, wow, you are very, very, very—

Mr. Charles: Important.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—important. You are honoured to be a borough. So, there are several other areas where the consequential amendments, I am looking for that brief where they are, consequential amendments. So one immediate thing that will happen is this, you will get a change of name from chairman to mayor and from deputy chairman to deputy mayor.

Mr. Charles: Big deal.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Big deal. Because when you look at the Act now, the main Act, it says all these are still municipalities. They are all the same.

Then you get the change as well to the markets and slaughterhouse. That is the one I was looking at. Part VIII of that Act will now apply to these places. This part does not apply to a municipality, which is not a city or borough except, whatever. But a Legal Notice 133 of 1993, the operation of Part VII, Part VIII of the Act was extended to these municipal corporations. So, they already had it

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extended to them via Legal Notice; all the regional corporations. So, when you change them now into boroughs, it is not going to change the price of cocoa or fish or meat.

There are a few sections that remain and this is what will happen.

No person may hold market for the sale of fresh meat, fish, or other marketable commodities in any place within a city or borough, not being a public market.

That is the point I made before. So that, to me, seems to be like a disadvantage rather than a benefit.

There are some other provisions again, ludicrous and minor. With respect to municipal police, again there is no change here. Legal Notice No.194 of 1996, no material difference when it comes to the municipal police.

We come to clause 4. All these are consequential changes. So all these changes are basically, and I said again, to put in the new name change. As I—give me a time check, please?

Hon. Member: Ten minutes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: As we close on this matter—10 minutes, oh great, EBC change, in this Act you have a consequential amendment and others. Again, municipality means now to include these two new boroughs. For the purposes of the Act, we had divided it. Now we are changing it. Before it was five, seven regional. Just, again, consequential to reflect the two new ones. That takes care of the consequential amendments in this particular piece of law.

I talk to you about the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic Regulations. And again, nothing to bring benefit to anyone. So, when we compare them to see where

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we are going, we are not going to get any better.

And if I may go to one other point. My colleague raised the issue of the cost of signage. This name change is going to cost the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago, how much? And I wish the Minister would tell us. My colleague raised the question: How much it is? Let us just look at Siparia. The cost just to change the sign, you have to change that sign from Siparia regional to Siparia borough; the same thing up in Diego, you will have to do the same.

5.00 p.m.

You have to change signage on every street. You have to change it on every cemetery. We have to change in Siparia, the cremation site. You have to change the markets and abattoirs. You have to change the recreation grounds and parks, on vehicles, signage on building. You have to change it. Cost of new stamps—you have to buy new stamps, you know, new stamps. You have to buy new stationary, financial documents, the cheques have to be changed too, nametags, badges, uniforms, all of this.

In Siparia, I am advised that there are 412 streets, vested streets approximately. So you have to go and change 412 street signs. Look at this, that is what it is going to cost, over 1 million to \$2 million in just signage.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What is the benefit to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? What is the benefit for the people of Trinidad and Tobago? And one other thing, Minister, I think you need to talk to somebody like the Minister of Finance, because you gave figure for moneys allocated to the corporations that is totally not true. You said, for example, that Siparia got—what was it, \$82 million?

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Let us look at Siparia, page 37 of your *Hansard*:

“Siparia has received this year \$88 million. In 2021, they got \$10 million.”

Mr. Lee: What.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You hear? That is not the truth. That is totally not true.

Mr. Charles: Privileges, bring it.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:

“...382 per cent increase in funding.”

Totally not true.

“...in terms of request for funding...we can demonstrate up to nearly 400 per cent increase in funding for the borough of Siparia...”

Not true, Mr. Deputy Speaker, totally not true. If you look at the estimates for development expenditure, the Minister is way off the mark. Way off the mark.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: No surprise.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When the Minister tells us now that they had \$10 million before and they are now getting what? Got \$88 million. What he did was take oranges and apples and joined them together. He was adding the development expenditure when he gave the big figure, together with the recurrent expenditure. But when he gave the one for the \$10 million, he did not do that. So he gave the lower figure. Again, he is just misleading this House; misleading this House.

There was no material change to the allocations or the actual spend and so on. And the issue that the Minister—the point the Minister made about people not using the money, nothing is further from the truth. Nothing further from the truth.

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Nothing further from the truth. So when we see here now there was an instance in—where was it? Grande somewhere, you give them the money—what is it, Khadijah? A week or something before the budget?

Ms. Ameen: Two weeks before the end of the—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You gave it two days before the end of—how will they spend it?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: How come we did not have that problem under the administration I led? And then the Minister says, “Oh, you know, we get a great benefit here you know. It is a great benefit. You will now be able to get twinning. The local government association, you could twin.” Minister, are you the Rural Development and Local Government Minister of this country now? Do you not know Sangre Grande, who is a regional corporation, is twinned with an international corporation abroad? Do you not know that? You do not have to become a borough to be a twinned. You can be anyone—

Mr. Charles: Teach him.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am sure the Deputy Speaker knows—

Mr. Charles: Teach him.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—as a local government practitioner. You do not have to become a borough. You do not have to—it has been going on for years. You do not have to become a borough to get twinning status. And then the Minister tells us again, “Well, yuh could get more funding now. Yuh could get loans and so on.” It is always the law of our land, unless it is changed, that any statutory body who wants to get a loan, and all these corporations are statutory

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bodies created under the statute, if you want to get a loan you have to go to the hon. Minister of Finance. So do not talk finance again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: Teach him. Teach him.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Talk to the Minister of Finance. Talk to the Minister of Finance. Go to some of the main areas that I recalled. And as I close, I want thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the time.

So I cannot talk about the Privy Council judgement. But I can tell you something, the right to vote, for a citizen to exercise their right to vote, whether they be in a borough of Siparia or whether they be in the borough of Diego Martin, wherever they may be, I want you to remember this acronym, "VOTE". What does it mean? Victory of the electorate. VOTE: victory of the electorate. But it seems to the PNM, VOTE means, victory over the electorate, power for them, and victory and power over the electorate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The Opposition UNC, we will always stand with the people of T&T. We will support measures that will improve the quality of their lives. I say, again, this Bill represents nothing more than a superficial change and the people of Diego Martin and Siparia, indeed the whole of T&T, we deserve a government that will seek their best interest. This Government has shown that it does not care about fixing the mess they have created; failing economy, spiralling crime rate, declining business sector, high unemployment. I say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the people want change and we demand that change.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And we say to them, you are suffering, we know, but do not tote, vote.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Do not tote if there is high prices. If there is flooding, there is crime, unemployment, do not tote, vote. And when you go out to vote, you vote for the UNC. I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for San Fernando West.

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It was good to see Siparia on her feet addressing the honourable House. It has been a long, long time since I have seen the hon Member speak with some zeal because it is—

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar: Because I am glad to be back in my seat.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: —quite interesting, because—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please, Members, Members.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is good to hear from the hon. Member for Siparia, always engaging, regrettably still as trivial as always and contribution lacking in purpose, but I will deal with that with specifics and I will unmask some of the untruths told by the Member for Siparia by reference to the particulars of facts, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have heard for three successive days and more in this House, how trivial this debate is. The hon. Member for Siparia called this debate a “name change debate”—

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Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: —and spent her entire contribution, when it was open, if it was as trivial as the hon. Member claims it is, to just simply say, “I agree and let us move on.” But that is not what the hon. Member did. Indeed, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what I can say is that the echoes of Siparia were heard in St. Augustine, were heard in Oropouche West, were heard today in Couva North, because they all had pretty much the same thing to say, save for the skirting of the Piarco judgment, which the hon. member for Siparia tried to engage in, but I am sure there will be another opportunity for that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Bill before us is connected to local government reform, and the hon. Prime Minister presented an excellent position on the confluence of this particular Bill, together with the fact that local government reform was afoot. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when I piloted this law, I did reflect upon the Court of Appeal’s decision in February, as I did, which was then upholding of the validity of the proclamation of certain sections. And as a matter of fact, the hon. Prime Minister has today put the Government’s position post the Privy Council's judgment.

Mr. Charles: He should apologize.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: I cannot understand for the life of me how one can seek to change facts, however. So the fact that the Court of Appeal ruled in a particular way is just a fact, and the fact that the Privy Council ruled in a particular way is just a fact.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Standing Order, relevance—

Mr. Charles: 48(1).

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Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: 48(1)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: And again, Members, the Member for Diego Martin West was given a little opportunity, Siparia was also given—Member for Siparia was also given an opportunity, in your winding up I will give you a little opportunity, so proceed.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the rules of debate thank you for allowing me to engage in a reply because that is what I am doing. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is not tedious repetition to reply in a debate, so I thank you for your guidance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in upholding my position.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fact is that the law is crystal clear—

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, can you control Siparia?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members—again, I am recognizing the Member for San Fernando West. Please let us hear his discourse in silence.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Siparia stood here and made a startling allegation, which I wish to respond to. The hon. Member said that there was no clarity and that people are in limbo post the delivery of the Privy Council judgment. The hon. Member is a seasoned Member of this Parliament and saw it fit to gift herself silk, and therefore ought to be capable of reading the Municipal Corporations Act. The Municipal Corporations Act, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is absolutely clear in section 11(4)—and permit me to answer the hon. Member's question and ridiculous submission about lack of clarity. Section 11(4) of the Municipal Corporations Acts reads:

“The term of office of Councillors shall be three years...”

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That was changed to four—

“...and they shall retire together ...”

Let me repeat that:

“...they shall retire together on the last day of every triennial period, the first of which shall be deemed to have begun on the day on which the Councillors were elected...”

The Privy Council in its judgment of the 18th of May, 2023, put in black and white that the councils expired on the 1st of December, 2022, because they reversed the Court of Appeal’s decision. And therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I demand, on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that Siparia gives back the silk that she took for herself. Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, unless there is a Standing Order—

Mr. Charles: I rise on Standing Order 4—it is insulting and downright degrading—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, Member, Member, address the Chair.

Mr. Charles: —for a Member to speak to another Member like that. And in particular, one who is a senior in law—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, thank you.

Mr. Charles: And one who has—[*Inaudible*]—Privy Council.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right. Member. Member for Naparima, your Standing Order has been heard.

Mr. Charles: Yes, Sir.

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Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: So—

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am not taking it back.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please, again. Right? I know you are winding up the Bill, I know you have to respond, but let us keep it all in tandem with the information that is before us on the Bill, please.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the record, I am responding to the hon. Member as I am entitled to do. Thank you very much for giving me that privilege and for your guidance.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I demand, on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, that the Member for Siparia read the Municipal Corporations Act, particularly because it is expressly clear in section 11(4) that the councillors and aldermen retired in the triennial term, and therefore their life came to an end on the 1st of December, 2022. If the hon. Member is not capable of reading the law, then I invite the hon. Member to read the judgment of the Privy Council's majority, which expressly said that the life of the council came to an end on the 1st of December, 2022.

So for the hon. Member to stand up, and worse yet babble in crosstalk while I am trying to wrap up this debate, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to misrepresent that there is some uncertainty, is just wrong, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member, again, in a boldface untruth to the people of Trinidad and Tobago on this floor, sought to say, in resonating an allegation by Couva North, that there was no attempt for the UNC to

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reverse its position in the Siparia Council having resolved to obtain borough status. The hon. Member read from some scraps of paper that I could not get the reference to, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because the reference was not put audibly onto the *Hansard*. But what I found curious, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that—

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, will you control Naparima?

Ms. Ameen: You control yourself, “nah.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. Again, Members, in silence. All right? That is the rule of this particular Chamber. I recognize, again, in his winding up, the Member for San Fernando West. Proceed.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, what was staggering is that the hon. Member for Siparia did not read from the full text of the motion coming from the Siparia Regional Corporation. In fact, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Siparia Corporation met and discussed, and it is in the Minutes of the Siparia Regional Corporation’s record, which I am just looking for now to read for you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that they were caused to meet as a council to read into the record an explanation as to why one, Dave Tancoo, the Member for Oropouche West, attended, at the invitation of Members, to have a discussion on the Siparia resolution, which to date has not been rescinded by a subsequent council.

And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just say to the Member for Siparia, if one purports to give a position, give the whole position. Because the Member ought to know that the Siparia Regional Corporation in fact held this meeting, and let me give you, hon. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the reference.

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There is from the Corporate Secretary of the Siparia Regional Corporation to the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government correspondence dated 27th September, 2021 and the subject is:

“Consensus of the Siparia Regional Corporation Council with regard to the status change of the borough corporation.”

And Mr. Deputy Speaker, are the 21st Statutory Meeting held on September 23, 2021 when the Member came to tell us—Siparia came to tell us about resolutions in 2019. The hon. Member neglected to give the full position and therefore, in my humble estimation, misled this honourable House by not referring to the fact that at item 244.1 of the minutes, it is in black and white that Alderman of the Corporation, Encinas, indicated that he found it disrespectful that the Member for Parliament for Oropouche East Mr. Davendranath Tancoo, was invited to attend the meeting and was allowed to contribute. And I am speaking now about specifically the matter of Siparia, and its resolution for borough status.

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, Siparia and St. Augustine, that is not how it is done. Member for Siparia, you had your opportunity and I think you had it well, please, please.

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the minutes of the Siparia Regional Corporation in 2021, clearly demonstrate that up to the life of the current council, the incumbent council which has just expired, ruling given on May 18, 2023 that it expired since December 1st that in the life of that council, there was discussion in

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relation to the Siparia Regional Corporation, resolving that it wanted to become a corporation, which was to move to borough status. So, for the Members to stand opposite and say that nobody in the UNC tried to get them, the Siparia corporation to change their mind and to trivialize the role of an alderman of the Siparia corporation and say—well that is just an alderman, I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the People's National Movement does not trivialize local government politics, and we do not share in the politics of the Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fact is that the hon. Member asked: What is different today? And Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Siparia asked that in two particular ways, as she now leaves the Chamber.

Ms. Ameen: Where is your leader?

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fact is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No.

Ms. Ameen: Where is Dr. Rowley?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for St. Augustine—

Ms. Ameen: I find—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, listen, listen Member for St. Augustine, you continue to do it. You continue to do it.

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, it is not a discourse. It is not a discourse. You do not have to respond to everything that is being mentioned, please. Member for Siparia, you okay? Nice.

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Hon. F. Al Rawi: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if one can even navigate a response in silence, it will be appreciated Mr. Deputy Speaker. Thank you, St. Augustine. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fact is that the hon. Member for Siparia asked: What is different now? The hon. Member of Siparia asked that in two specific manners—two specific contexts. One, with respect to the public procurement legislation, and then went on to make an untruthful and bold allegation that no procurement officers have been appointed in the context of the local government nomination of its persons for public procurement and then also asked, in the context of the status of borough: What was different now?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, just to, again, point out another glaring untruth by the Member for Siparia, I wish to refer to written correspondence sent to the Ministry by the CEO for the Siparia Regional Corporation, which in fact provided the correspondence from the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, to all corporations. And what I find outstanding is that the Member for Siparia, who is representative of one of the constituencies in the Siparia Regional Corporation, does not know via the Chairman of that corporation who is a Member of the UNC that there is in fact, named procurement officers for all 14 regional corporations. And for the record, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with respect to the Siparia Regional Corporation, permit me to put it on record that the Administrative Officer II, Mrs. Cheryl Pariag-Singh, with particular contact details, is the named procurement officer.

So, for the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia to stand in this House and say that there are no officers, particularly, in the Siparia Regional

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Corporation is just a complete untruth. And I am now on to untruth no. 5 of the Member for Siparia.

Mr. Manning: Litany of untruths.

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Litany of untruths. Mr. Deputy Speaker, with respect to the hon. Member and the allegation that there was: Why the change now to borough? I just want to put on record. As the hon. Prime Minister flagged, the Borough of Chaguanas was created as a borough by simply including it by name as a borough in the 1990 Act, which brought to life the Municipal Corporations Act. The Member for Siparia said, there is no evidence and stood and screamed at us. What is the source of the data to say that it is 33 years since a borough was created? What is the source? Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, the source is the Municipal Corporations Act itself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, Chap. 25:04 and if one has a simple ability in mathematics and you deduct the timeframe, you take 2023 the year we are in now and you minus 1990, you get 33 years, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And that is the source of the authority. The source of the authority is the very law that we are debating by way of amendment today, the parent law being the Municipal Corporations Act.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Siparia stood and said to us that the UNC does not support property tax, and that the time is wrong. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in making that very bold allegation that the UNC does not support property tax now, I want to remind the Leader of the Opposition, that when Siparia was the Prime Minister of this country it was the Minister of Finance, Mr. Larry Howai that came to the Parliament and informed that property tax would be

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applied to all citizens in Trinidad and Tobago in the year 2015. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in answering what is different now permit me to inform as follows:

There is a vast difference from when Dr. Rowley as the Opposition Leader spoke in relation to his reservations on property tax and now. And what is that difference Mr. Deputy Speaker? It is the amendments made in the 2022 Local Government Reform Act. And specifically, in that Local Government Reform Act, I want to remind that the Miscellaneous Provisions Act which came into effect in 2022, section 10, amended the Property Tax Act by inserting after section 9, a new section 9A. And that section 9A says:

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Siparia clearly does not have the power of recollection, nor the power of research, and certainly not the ability to give us the whole position by way of truth, because there is a vast difference between property tax going to the Central Government under the Property Tax Act, and property tax going to the Municipal Corporation pursuant to the local government reform package which by section 10 of the Municipal Corporations Act, amended the Property Tax Act to insert a new section 9A, giving the property tax to the municipal corporations so that they can spend the money.

The second difference which Siparia is obviously incapable of finding in law, is the fact that the Municipal Corporations Act, as it has been amended by the 2022 reform package creates standing committees, full time executive councils, so that those standing committees can engage in expenditure which includes property tax for the benefit of their burgesses. If the concept of a borough so odious to the

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Member for Siparia, and whilst the Member for Siparia was Prime Minister and enjoyed a parliamentary majority in the House of Representatives of 29 seats to the PNM's 12, why then did the Member for Siparia simply not remove the borough of Chaguanas from the status of borough of Chaguanas? Why? If it is so odious, and such a name change and so worthless, why did the Member for Siparia not simply remove Chaguanas as a borough? No, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that was nowhere in the intention of the Member for Siparia because "do so doh like so" particularly when in Opposition in the UNC camp, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Much like the penchant of the hon. Members to reinvent facts, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Siparia went into some history and told us that the NAR did a comprehensive local government reform package and created 18 municipal corporations and that in 1992, the PNM in fact, moved downward to 14 by adjusting the number of municipal corporations down to 13, leaving the cities and boroughs right where they were.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fact is that that was done by reference to geography and density. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is incumbent upon the political majority that controls a Parliament and that forms government to listen to all arms of government. The Government was faced via my predecessor in title, the hon. Haji Kazim Hosein, the previous Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, with written resolutions coming from the Diego Martin Regional Corporation and the Siparia Regional Corporation where the elected representatives of the municipal corporations, counselors and aldermen, as well resolved in writing that they wish the status of borough. How does the Government sit and do nothing in relation to that? Is that the style that the

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Member for Siparia advocates a government ought to engage in? Is that it? When one is called upon to make law in the Parliament is the only way that we can achieve borough status with no prescription in the law clear to cause change from borough to city, et cetera, is by the methodology that we are engaging in today in this Bill. We are amending the Municipal Corporations Act, we must amend five other consequential laws by way of consequential amendments, which you see in clause 6 of the Bill. But Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is an obligation of Central Government to deliver the wishes by the resolutions coming from the two corporations.

And Mr. Deputy Speaker, in simply saying that it is a name change—if it is a name change, then why have you spent three days opposing it? If it is so trivial a matter, why are you engaged in three days of debate—

Hon. Member: It does not make sense.

Hon. F. Al Rawi: —to oppose it? And if it does not make sense as the Member for Naparima says in his contribution to this debate earlier, then one has to ask the question: Well, why did you not change it, Mr. Deputy Speaker in the course whilst you were in power as the Government with a special majority in the House of Representatives? It just does not make sense Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Ms. Ameen: What?

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the references that the hon. Prime Minister made to joint select committee those references were very clear, the hon. Prime Minister was making reference to the fact that we are dealing with—Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence please, Members.

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5.30 p.m.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: We are dealing with, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the association of this Bill with local government reform, and, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the record and by way of particularity of facts, the consultation engaged in the larger local government reform package was 1.1 million online contributions; 32,000 in-person contributions, and those were met by a minority report of the Opposition where they simply said, “Disagreement with property tax do not wish to have the creation of an executive council because it excludes a minority, that there is no provision for equity in population size and there was insufficient consultation with stakeholders.” And for the record and by way of clarification as to the submissions made by the hon. Prime Minister which were criticized by the Leader of the Opposition, that is the context that the hon. Prime Minister was speaking about. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there was another point, the Leader of the Opposition made a song and a dance, saying that the hon. Prime Minister did not attend to the local government consultation arranged on the discussions for local government reform implementation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to put on the record that the Prime Minister, having personally convened the meeting, did not attend because the day before the meeting the hon. Prime Minister was confirmed to have COVID, and therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I attended that meeting, together with the Leader of the House, and gave a presentation. Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Siparia then went on in a tirade to say, “Nothing has been done by way of operationalization for local government reform.” Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is the furthest thing from the truth, because if you talk to the municipal corporations, as I

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have continuously since March 17, 2022, you will know that today the status of implementation of reform inside of the corporations is significant. Whereas at month 10, the expenditure for PSIP, the Public Sector Investment Programme is usually at 2 per cent in certain corporations, they are fact at nearly 98 per cent at this point, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to remind, the Government is always extremely conscious about proclaiming law; we are not a section 34 government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: We do not engage in the idle proclamation of law to then have to go to the Parliament in—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(1), this has no relevance to the borough debate.

Hon. Member: What?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The Member is winding up—the Member is winding up, overruled. Proceed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: So in answer to the Member for Siparia who says, “They have proclaimed nothing in the local government reform package”, in a shrill tone; “Nearly half of the time has gone and they proclaimed nothing. Show us one thing that has been proclaimed”, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the process—

Mr. Charles: Would you give way?

Hon. Members: No.

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

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Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—of proclamation of law requires that you engage in making sure that you protect a Government against attack, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Let me give you a live example of what I mean, speaking to you, through you, to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, when a previous government under Siparia proclaimed the existence of child rehabilitation centres and then was met by a lawsuit from the past Attorney General who was Attorney General for Siparia, saying that it was premature—

Ms. Ameen: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—proclamation, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member—[*Inaudible*]

Ms. Ameen: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(1)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Thank you.

Ms. Ameen:—this has no relevance to the borough of Siparia and Diego Martin.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: All right. Members, Members—continue your winding up, Member.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when a government under Siparia proclaimed the child rehabilitation centres and then when in Opposition their Attorney General, who served in that Government, rolls out to actually challenge the proclamation of the very law that Siparia oversaw to turn on to result in damages and the expenditure of millions of dollars, Mr. Deputy Speaker, “dem is people to watch cokey eye”, because the court that heard that matter was compelled to comment on what appeared to be the impropriety—

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Mr. Hinds: Of course.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—of the attorney who was taking the point, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Charles: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on 48(1), if he wants to talk of the Privy Council, be holistic and say “yuh lose”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So watching the UNC game book, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which is to tell you how to do things, like proclaim a law when “yuh” not ready, like turn on section 34 and let people go when “yuh” not ready and have to go to the Privy Council to rewind the proclamation and vesting of rights, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to watch millions and millions of dollars in legal fees expended with uncertainty, with—

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—tens of thousands of people protesting and marching in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I take no advice from the Member for Siparia. I do however pray for the Member for Siparia for her health, good health. Why, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Because as long as the Member for Siparia is in good health the UNC will stay in Opposition.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, your initial speaking time has elapsed, you have an additional—

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

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Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, “I beg to move”.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Pardon?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: “I beg to move”.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Is it finished?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yeah.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to demonstrate the untruths of the Member for Siparia, and I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.

House in committee.

Mr. Chairman: This committee of a whole will convene. Welcome to the senior technocrats at the Ministry. Welcome.

Clauses 1 to 6 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Schedule ordered to stand part of the Bill.

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

House resumed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister of Rural Development and Local Government.

Hon. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I wish to report that the Miscellaneous Provisions (Establishment of the Borough of Diego Martin and the Borough of Siparia) Bill, 2021, was considered in the committee of the whole and approved without amendments. I now beg to move that the House agree with the committee’s report.

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Question put and agreed to.

Question put and agreed to: That the Bill be read a third time.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, at this time the House will be suspended—hon. Members, at this time the sitting will be suspended for approximately 30 minutes.

5.45 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

6.15 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The House now stands resumed. I will call on the Leader of the House.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. With your leave, I seek the indulgence of this House to revert to the item, Introductions of Bills, to complete a procedure which was interrupted when the MP for Pointe-a-Pierre rose earlier.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You may proceed, Leader of the House.

Assent indicated.

VALUATION OF LAND (AMDT.) BILL, 2023.

Bill to amend the Valuation of Land Act, Chap. 58:03 [*The Minister of Finance*]; read the first time.

Motion made: That the next stage be taken forthwith. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

Question put and agreed to.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move:

That a Bill to amend the Valuation of Land Act, Chap. 58:03, be now read a

second time.

The Bill before the House has just five clauses. The first clause is a typical short title. The second clause is the Interpretation clause, and the three operative clauses are clauses 3, 4 and 5.

Clause 3 is structured or is drafted to make it crystal clear that when the annual rental value of a property is determined by the Commissioner of Valuations, it will be an estimate. Generally, the valuation of land involves first determining the highest and best use of the site, estimating the value using modern appraising theory, and then reconciling to a final estimate of value.

For this reason it is felt, to avoid any attack on the legislation, that the definition of “annual rental value” should be amended to include the words “an estimate of” before the words “annual rent”.

Secondly, section 7 of the Valuation of Land Act, allows the Commissioner of Valuations to value land which is valued at less than \$18,000, where a return is made under section 6. However, as most recently demonstrated when the Commissioner of Valuations requested property owners to submit returns, one of the other sections where the Commissioner can request information is section 29. So persons can submit a return under section 6 of the Valuation of Land Act, but they can also submit a return under section 29 of the Valuation of Land Act, which is the section that we used most recently in the recent valuation exercise.

The amendment to section 7 allows the Commissioner of Valuations to value land, which is valued at less than \$18,000, at a flat figure of \$18,000. And whereas the current law limits that to returns made under section 6, this would now also include, in similar circumstances, where a return is submitted under section 29 of the Act.

Clause 5 of the Bill amends section 7A of the Valuation of Land Act, which

requires that 50 per cent of all land in Trinidad and Tobago be valued, prior to the Minister of Finance making the required order under section 7A(2) of the Act, to give effect to those valuations.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is important to note that property tax is only applicable to lands that fall under the specific categories named in the Act, such as:

- “(a) residential land;
- (b) commercial land;
- (c) industrial land; and
- (d) agriculture land,”

The structure of the Act as it is now could lead to an argument that the establishment of the valuation roll cannot be done, unless the valuation of 50 per cent of all land in Trinidad and Tobago has been completed.

Under the Valuation of Land Act, the meaning of “land” is extremely broad and reads as follows:

- “(a) all land, messuages, tenements and hereditaments, corporeal and incorporeal of every kind and description or any estate or interest therein, together with all paths, passages, ways, watercourses, liberties and privileges;
- (b) land covered with water; and
- (c) all buildings or any part of any building, and all structures, machinery, plant, pipelines, cables and fixtures erected or placed upon, in, over, under or affixed to land;”

In other words, land is everything. That is an interpretation, that “land” means everything. So it is land under water, forests, swamps, churches, schools, every watercourse, buildings, all structures, machinery, plants, pipelines, and the list goes on and on and on.

Valuing 50 per cent of all land will therefore be very difficult, unless we undertake the task of valuing the forests in Trinidad and Tobago, which in fact take up almost 50 per cent of the land space.

In order to deal with this nuance, and again to avoid attacks on the exercise that we have embarked upon, it is proposed that the threshold of 50 per cent required for the Commissioner of Valuations to create the valuation roll, and forward the roll to the Minister, be meant to include the singular. In other words, the Commissioner of Valuations would, in this amendment, be able to value 50 per cent of residential land, or 50 per cent of commercial land, or 50 per cent of industrial land, or 50 per cent of agriculture land. And when valuations in the various categories have been completed to the threshold of 50 per cent, the Commissioner can then proceed to create the valuation roll and send that to the Minister for continuation of the process.

It reads as follows, the amendment that we are seeking to make, section 7A is repealed and the following new section is substituted:

“7A (1) Where the Commissioner is of the view that more than fifty per cent of any”—and “any” is the operative word here—“of the following categories of land:

- (a) residential land;
- (b) commercial land;
- (c) industrial land; and
- (d) agricultural land

in Trinidad and Tobago have been valued and that the valuations should take effect, he shall notify the Minister in writing.”

And:

“(2) Within fourteen days of receipt by the Minister of The advice that the

singular”—in other words, any one of these four—“or several categories of the land valuations notified under subsection (1) should take effect, the Minister may by Order declare that the valuations are in effect.””

So it is a two-stage process. The Commissioner does her work, values 50 per cent of any of the following categories of land—residential, commercial, industrial or agricultural—notifies the Minister, and within 14 days the Minister makes an order to declare that the valuations in that particular valuation roll, or those particular valuation rolls, if there is more than one that has reached the 50 per cent, shall take effect.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to reiterate again that new properties are constructed every day, so that it is impossible to achieve a 100 per cent valuation of all properties at any given time. I want to repeat that. New properties are constructed every day, and therefore it is impossible to achieve 100 per cent valuation of all properties at any given time.

I am advised that the records show that in the history of Trinidad and Tobago, there has never been a complete valuation roll created under the Valuation of Land Act. There has never been a 100 per cent valuation roll. In other words, a valuation roll that captured every single property in Trinidad and Tobago. It has never happened, even though the Valuation of Land Act dates back to 1969, which is over 50 years ago.

I am also advised, there has never been a proper or complete valuation roll completed for properties in Trinidad and Tobago under the Act. Therefore, the task that the Valuation Division has been engaged in for the last several years is a mammoth task, an extremely difficult task. I want to commend and congratulate the staff in that division, the Commissioner of Valuations herself, for taking on such a mammoth task, and I will explain how significant that task is in due course.

But I would also like to reiterate why we are doing this.

When the Lands and Buildings Taxes Act was repealed at that time, prior to that, the tax yielded in excess of \$100 million per year. So 2008 and so on, the Government was in receipt of over \$100 million per year from land and building taxes. The waiver or deferral of this tax over the last 14 years—yes, 14 years, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there has been no land and building tax collected in this country for 14 years—has meant that the Treasury has forgone, if we use the lowest level, in excess of \$1.4 billion in revenue, if the original Lands and Buildings Taxes Act, and Municipal Corporations Act had remained intact and in place.

So if nothing had happened over the last 14 years, the Act had not been interfered with, successive governments would have collected in excess of \$1.4 billion. I am sure it would have been far more than that because, as I indicated, the valuation roll was incomplete. Some of the valuations dated back to the 1960s, 1970s, and they were therefore woefully out of date. There were persons paying \$5 and \$10 in land and building taxes on an annual basis.

6.30 p.m.

So, I think it is also necessary for me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to give a global overview of the whole question of land taxes. Now, I have taken the opportunity to look at land taxes in the United States, the United Kingdom and in the countries of the European Union. In all of these jurisdictions, land tax includes the taxation of land and buildings. I found just one jurisdiction, Estonia, out of 27 or 28 EU countries where the taxation is simply limited to land. In all these jurisdictions, the United States, the United Kingdom, the countries of the European Union, the taxes are paid annually to either municipalities or councils. And that is a very important point because what we are doing in Trinidad and Tobago and what will happen when the valuation role is created and the Commission of Valuations informs me

that more than 50 per cent of properties in the residential category have been valued and I make the order, what will happen is that for the first time all 14 municipal corporations will be able to collect the Property Tax and be able to retain the Property Tax and use it for the benefit of the residents of the municipalities, for the first time.

In the past, there were just some of the municipalities, for example the Port of Spain City Corporation, that collected taxes of this nature. Now all 14—so that means, the seven Opposition and the seven Government, PNM Corporations will be entitled to collect Property Tax, keep it, and spend it for the benefits of the residents of their particular regions. Now, this is a very important component of the decentralization of fiscal revenues, it is a very important component of the devolution of authority to local bodies. Across all jurisdictions, it is accepted that these funds should be used for the benefit of the municipality, the borough council, the region and so on. In the UK, the approach is that an annual payment, it is called a council tax, is made by owner of the property, which is based on the market value of the property, quite different to what we are doing. And I want to stress at this point in time, one of the areas of mischief propagated by persons opposed to this tax is the untruth that taxation in Trinidad and Tobago on properties will be based on the capital value, the resale value of properties. That is completely untrue. The way the system works and the way the various bits of legislation are structured, the Commissioner of Valuations will work out a rental value, an estimate, as we are now doing with this legislation and based on that estimate of the annual rental value of the properties, a percentage is applied and then the amount of tax is arrived at. So it is not, as some of the opponents of this tax have spent years misleading people and telling them by way of example, that if your house is worth a million dollars, you will have to pay three per cent of that in

tax per year, which is \$30,000, completely untrue. In fact, if I use an example, if you take a million dollar property, that might rent for \$3,000 a month and if you take the annual rental value as \$36,000 a year and you take three per cent of that, you are getting in the vicinity of \$1,000 or \$90 a month. And therefore, it is not three per cent of \$1 million which is \$30,000, which is what the tax is going to be, not at all is it three per cent of \$36,000. So it is not \$30,000, it is \$1,000 and this is an untruth that has been propagated by the opponents of the tax.

I looked at some of the values of tax that people have to pay. If one looks at the United Kingdom, the average tax I am told, in the United Kingdom for an average home, an average small flat, two bedroom flat in the United Kingdom the average tax per year, is in the vicinity of £2,000. So in the UK, your ordinary person, your bus driver, your dock worker, has to pay council tax somewhere close to \$20,000 a year. In our case, the equivalent person has to pay \$1,000 per year, I just want to make that clear, because there is a lot of misinformation and a lot of mischief outside there.

In Trinidad and Tobago, we also have a long history of land and building taxes, so it is not to say that this is something new. How much more time do I have, Mr. Deputy Speaker?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You finish at 7.02, Mr. Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay, lots of time. So it is not to say that this is something new and I want to make the point, because I went way back to see what was the opposition to this tax back in 2009/2010. And the view was, at the time that people should not have to pay any more than they were paying in land and building taxes, not that there should not be any tax. But somehow this thing has mutated into, there should be no property tax at all.

So, let me give the history of Trinidad and Tobago. My research tells me

that as far back as 1785, each of Trinidad's three Commissioners of Population had to supervise the clearing and repairing of roads among the planters and based on that, that was something called the *curvé*, the compulsory contribution of labour and material. It was the earliest imposition in the way of a tax on land owners, it persisted from 1785 to 1844. So land owners back in the 18th century in Trinidad and Tobago were required to pay tax based on the services—because this is another very important thing, why pay the tax at all? The history of Trinidad and Tobago, going back over 200 years, the general principle was established that property tax was to raise the necessary revenue for the provision of services. So back in 1785, the work that was done by the then government, if you want to call it that, was to clear and repair roads and other infrastructure that serviced the plantations in Trinidad and Tobago.

In 1786, during the French occupation of Tobago, a house tax that fell largely to merchants and artisans was levied and I found this quite shocking. In 1786, the French who occupied Tobago at the time, levied attacks of eight per cent of the capital value of houses in Scarborough, Plymouth and Georgetown and for those who do not know Tobago, Georgetown is now called Studley Park.

6.40 p.m.

Moving on, in 1815 by order of Prince Regent, a house tax was introduced in Port of Spain for the first time. So we have had a house tax in Port of Spain now for over 200 years, and again it was tied to services. The tax was calculated based on the cost of gravelling streets and laying the pavements that led to every dwelling house in Port of Spain. The cost at that time was \$120. So it was quite significant a \$120 200 years ago. In 1844, an Ordinance was introduced which introduced annual house rates for Port of Spain from the 1st of January 1845 at the rate of 5 per cent of the annual rent or annual value. Arima and San Fernando

followed shortly afterwards. Ordinance No. 9 of 1849 levied taxes on lands and buildings outside of the municipal areas. So you had Arima, San Fernando, Port of Spain, where property owners were taxed to the extent of 5 per cent of the annual rent as far back as 1845. In 1851, Lord Harris used a tax called ward rates to fund primary education in ward schools. In 1905, the Belmont Improvement Ordinance No. 38 of 1905 provided for the cost of new bridges and streets in Belmont.

So I am giving this history, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so that Members will understand that we have had a history in this country for over 200 years of linking land and building tax, property tax, whatever you want to call it, to the provision of services by the local government bodies. So in 1905 in Belmont, an ordinance provided for the cost of new bridges and streets. The Government contributed half, the town commissioners one quarter, because in those days the town commissioners were the landed gentry, and the householders, the remainder, by way of an improvement rate of 2 per cent on the annual rateable value of their houses. Shortly after that, various other parts of the country followed. Fast forwarding to the future, also the present times, sorry, not to the future, under Part 5 of the Municipal Corporations Act, Chaguanas and Point Fortin became taxing authorities. Prior to that it was simply Port of Spain and San Fernando.

So I have given some of this history, Mr. Deputy Speaker, so people will understand that the history of land and building taxes and property taxation in Trinidad and Tobago is over 200 years, and therefore what we are doing is no different to what has occurred before. When you look at the rates that were charged 200 years ago they were in fact higher, 5 per cent and 8 per cent of the rental value and so on. I took the opportunity also, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to take a look at what happens in the rest of the region, and I am reading from a report produced by the Economic Commission of Latin America and the Caribbean called

“Options for Retooling Property Tax in Latin America”, and in this report, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it gives you some indication of the revenue that is generated by property taxation in various Latin American countries, and when I look at the table I see for example Argentina collects .4 per cent of GDP, Brazil .6 per cent of GDP, Colombia .8 per cent of GDP, the average for Latin America is .5 per cent when you look at all countries. Uruguay is actually .9 per cent, and the developed countries in the OECD, the average is 1.1 per cent.

If we were to take that and translate it to our current GDP which is about \$195 billion one would see that if we were generating .4 per cent of our revenue from—.4 per cent of our GDP in terms of revenue from property tax we would be collecting somewhere in the vicinity of \$800 million per year. So across Latin America, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, et cetera, the average for Latin America is .5 per cent of GDP. When one looks as well at what is happening in these countries it is very interesting, in those countries as well the tax is attacked because of perceptions of unfairness, and basically the ratio shows that property tax becomes unpopular when it is perceived as unfair. It is also becomes unpopular when it is perceived to be arbitrary, and therefore it is incumbent on us as a Government to properly educate the population as to what the true facts are with respect to property taxation.

Coming back to the Bill, let me spend a little time now on valuation methods. Now there is no one simple way of valuing a property. A valuation method is intended, as the Bill makes clear, because we are making that amendment, to provide an estimate of market value, the annual rental value. In any such situation, the valuer has to look at the market, the valuer has to look at the condition of the property, the valuer has to look at location, has to look at its topography, and looking at all these factors the valuer will arrive at a particular

value for the rental value. Now there are some people who would say, and this is a worldwide phenomenon, how can you estimate the rental value of my property when I am not renting my property? In other words, I am not paying rent, I own it. I am not renting it to anybody, so how could you tell me what the rental value is? There is an easy answer to that. Because clearly when a valuer, the Commissioner of Valuations, is going into a particular neighbourhood or district, there will be properties that are rented, there will also be national indicators, and it is quite easy for the valuer to determine what the rental value of a house would be, or an apartment, if it were rented.

There are very few areas in Trinidad and Tobago where there is no evidence whatsoever of what the rental of that class of property would be. I dare say none. Because quite a large proportion of our population lives in rented accommodation, and the proof of that is the number of applications before the Housing Development Corporation. We hear all sorts of numbers, but I am certain we all agree that every government has said that the number of applications for housing before the Housing Development Corporation exceed 100,000. I can speak for myself, as a Member of Parliament I am aware that many of my constituents are in rented property, and therefore it is not at all difficult using international standards, using local data, using actual evidence of rental of similar properties in the particular location for the Commissioner of Valuations to arrive at an estimate of rent.

It is also quite simple for the Valuation Division as well to do what is call Computer Assisted Mass Appraisal. So you would have areas where the vast majority of houses would all be the same, and therefore it is quite easy in a situation like that, particularly in government housing projects, very easy for the Valuation Division to do a mass valuation of hundreds and thousands, or thousands

of houses as the case may be. That is also possible as well in other areas which may not have been developed by the Government. I said previously that your typical property tax, that your typical ordinary blue-collar worker in the United Kingdom would have to pay per year at least £2,000, close to \$20,000 a year. The information I have as well, that in the United States, in 2022, the average single family homeowner paid property tax in the vicinity of \$3,700 US per year, \$25,000. I am stating these facts, if you live in the United Kingdom you would pay the equivalent of almost \$20,000 Trinidad per year in property tax. If you live in the United States you could pay as much as \$25,000 per year in property tax. In Trinidad and Tobago, as I have said, we expect at the lower level, persons to pay somewhere in the vicinity of a \$1,000, \$1,200, figures like that. So that our tax is not as draconian as some persons would like us to believe.

The other point I wish to make is that we need to get on with this, because for far too long we have been talking—we just had a debate—about the ineffectiveness of the local government bodies, about the fact that local government bodies are starved for funds, but what certain persons in this Parliament like to do is to speak out of both sides of their mouth. So on the one hand they complain that local government bodies are starved of funds and on the other hand they object to a system which will generate funds directly for the use, retention and spending by local government corporations for the very goods and services that the residents in those regions require. So we need to get on. We firmly believe that this is the right thing to do. We firmly believe that all of the events of this month and the fact that we are moving forward with a new local government system, the fact that we are going to devolve many functions to local government bodies that they may not now have responsibility for, we think it is absolutely essential that we create this dedicated income stream for all 14 regional

corporations in Trinidad and Tobago. I can give an update on where we are in term of valuations.

The number of properties identified in Trinidad and Tobago from aerial photographs and from data from T&TEC, from WASA, and from TTPost, and from data from the records of the Valuations Division from the old land and building taxes system, based on all available data the number of properties in Trinidad and Tobago is estimated at approximately 600,000. Using data from T&TEC recently acquired the GIS specialist has informed that approximately 400,000 of the 600,000 properties that are connected to electricity were identified as being residential, and that is based on T&TEC's categorization in terms of the type of metre that would be on these properties, the actual physical essence of the property T&TEC has identified from its database that of the approximate 600,000 properties in Trinidad and Tobago approximately 400,000 are residential; 49,000 are commercial, 3,000 are industrial, and the rest would fall into agricultural and other categories.

In term of the digitization of the outline of buildings on land, because the Valuations Division has done a tremendous amount of work, in terms of digitizing the building outlines of these 600,000 properties, so far the Valuations Division has digitized 536,876 properties in Trinidad, 33,665 properties in Tobago, for a total digitization of the outlines of buildings in Trinidad and Tobago of \$570,541. Giving some history, we have been at this process now for quite a while. We have faced all sorts of court challenges, and efforts by persons who are opposed to this to stop the process, or at least slow it down, but I am happy to say that in the last exercise to acquire information on properties we were able to acquire a total of—information a total of 186,000 properties, of which 134,000 were residential.

6.55 p.m.

Added to—and this is in the 2021 to 2022 exercise—records already in place from the 2017 exercise and other records, this is the following situation: in terms of residential properties, the Valuation Division has advised me that quite some time ago they have exceeded the 50 per cent threshold for residential properties. The current number of residential properties, I am advised, which are ready for the roll, they have been inspected, they have been examined, they have been viewed, they have analyzed—at this time 232,000 residential properties have been valued and are ready for the roll. This is clearly more than 50 per cent of the residential properties in Trinidad and Tobago.

And therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when this legislation is passed and there will be no more ambiguity as to whether the 50 per cent would include categories of land, like swamp and forest, land under water, and all that sort of thing, when it now becomes crystal clear that it is 50 per cent in each category, having reached 232,000 properties in the residential category and that being more than 50 per cent, I am satisfied that within the next month or so the Commissioner of Valuations will be able to produce for me, perhaps before that, the valuation roll for these 232,000 residential properties.

After the valuation roll is produced to me and I make the necessary order declaring that the valuation roll has been created, that roll is then sent to the Board of Inland Revenue where the percentages in the Property Tax Act would be applied. And as I said, it is 3 per cent of the rental value. So that taking the typical property I mentioned, the one at the lower level, that would rent for maybe \$3,000 a month. The Board of Inland Revenue would then call upon the owners of those properties at that level to pay a tax of is \$1,000 per year, \$90 a month. Of course, as the values go up, you know, there would be wealthy persons whose properties would be valued at \$10,000 a month in rental value and, of course, they would pay

more. If I take somebody living Fairways, Valsayn, Palmiste, wherever, in a wealthier area where a property might rent for \$10,000 a month, \$120,000 a year, the property tax would be 3 per cent of that which would be TT \$4,600 per year for somebody living in one of the more upper class and wealthy areas. And again, in that case, if the rental value has been estimated at \$10,000 and the tax is \$4,600, or \$4,800 as the case may be, that is still one quarter of what it would be if you were living in England or if you were living in the United States in a much smaller unit.

But the main focus here of my presentation today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that this type of tax is used all over the world, in more than 150 countries of the world, to provide an income stream for local government bodies. That is what it is used for. It is not used for the federal government or for the national government in anyone of these 150 countries.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is going on?

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

Hon. C. Imbert: I am nearly done, but I do not know why over so making a set of noise. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to reinforce that all over the world, land and building tax and property tax is dedicated for the use of local government bodies for the provision of goods and services for the residents of these local areas. And therefore, what we are doing in Trinidad and Tobago is finally bringing Trinidad and Tobago into the modern era; finally creating a dedicated income stream for municipal corporations, no matter which political party is in charge; finally providing local government bodies with the funding that they require. I beg to move, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous crosstalk*]

Question proposed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for Oropouche West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo (*Oropouche West*): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to present today the Opposition's viewpoint on this Valuation of Land (Amdt.) Bill, 2023.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Mr. Deputy Speaker, having listened to the hon. Minister in his extensive presentation traverse the history of property tax, I am of the view that if the Minister wanted to narrate this story, what he should probably do is invest in a podcast to provide the history of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: What he did not do is provide substantial information with the specific reference to the Bill before this House. The Minister spent all this time ambling all over the place, referencing 1786—as far back as 1786. I would like the Minister to focus his attention, not on 1786, not on 1820, not on 1901, but today, 2023, May 24, 2023, because this is when this legislation is taking place, this is when the persons who are being affected, will be affected, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Focus Minister, focus.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, because the Minister himself failed, it falls upon me to provide a little bit more clarity with regard to this legislation. This Bill seeks to amend the parent Act, the Valuation of Land Act, Chap. 58:03, Act 18 of 1969. So it is a very old piece of legislation. This parent Act has been amended substantively on three previous occasions, with amendments taking place via Act No. 24 of 1981, Act No. 21 of 1990, Act No. 17 of 2009, and Act No. 5 of 2018.

An amendment was also made by a subsidiary legislation re: Legal Notice No. 69 of 2023, that was the Valuation of Land (Prescription of Time Frame for Provision of Information) Order, 2023.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Bill before us—and that is where I want to bring this House back to, not to the history lesson, because I think that was a deliberate attempt to mislead. I want to begin with the reference to the Minister's statement. The Minister started off by saying that there is a lot of misinformation, a lot of mischief with regard to property tax in the public domain. He started off with that, and may I also add, a lot of misdirection.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we need to first look at what is the purpose of this Bill. And that is what we thought the Minister was going to come and explain to us, what is the reason, the real reason for this Bill before this House. Because although this Bill is a mere five clauses, as the Minister glossed over, although it is a mere five clauses, the Bill is deceptively simple in its diminutive size, but gargantuan in its punishing effects that is going to have on the population of Trinidad and Tobago and the pockets of every citizens, perhaps not unlike the goodly hon. Minister himself. But we know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that we cannot trust this Government in big things and definitely not even in little things.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: So we need to ask, Mr. Deputy Speaker, why is this legislation being brought today, May 24, 2023, to this honourable House? Why has this Parliament been summoned to debate this piece of legislation today? What makes this Bill more important than the legislation to address the runaway crime rate, the worse in this country's—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—history that is savaging every man, woman and child in this country? What makes this Bill, the Valuation of Land (Amdt.) Bill, 2023, what makes this Bill more critical than the Minister of Finance taking action to take Trinidad and Tobago off the blacklist, the EU blacklist? What makes this Bill more important, Mr. Deputy Speaker, than actions to deal with falling investor confidence in Trinidad and Tobago since 2015?

Mr. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1).

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And for the clarification of my colleague, I said as much, we are explaining what the purpose of the Bill is. Thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I overruled. Proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Duly guided.

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for St. Augustine.

Mr. D. Tancoo: What is it about this Bill that gives it precedence over the need for government action to deal with the protection of youth in children's homes, or to deal with the growing violence in schools, or the failure of the Government to create jobs? What is it about this Bill that makes it more critical for the Government to come here today, than to take action to deal with any of the critical issues facing Trinidad and Tobago? Where in this Bill is there any provision designed to treat with any of the problems facing our citizens?

You know, in law, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we generally ask what mischief the legislation is seeking to address. But when it come to this Government, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have to ask what mischief this Government is up to when it

brings legislation like this to the House. And sometimes—somehow it always seems to be that the legislation brought by this Government seems to penalize the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And that is where we are today.

So why this Bill is before us, Mr. Deputy Speaker?—I will provide the answers for all of that. Simply, simply, this five-clause Bill brought by the hon. Minister, in which he spent 10 minutes to focus on, this five-clause Bill, seeks to expedite the implementation of property tax on all properties in Trinidad and Tobago: residential, commercial, agricultural and industrial. And why is that? Why he is suddenly bringing this legislation? Why the rush?

According to the Estimates of Revenue, 2023, provided by the hon. Minister in this very same House, the Government expected total revenue to be at around \$53.4 billion in fiscal 2022. Of this figure, the Government expected that based on the legislation, as it exists now, that it would have received \$50 million from property tax, if implemented, as promised by the Minister during the current fiscal year. That pales in comparison with \$1 million expected in 2022, or the \$250 million they expected in 2019, if they had implemented property tax when they were initially pursuing it.

7.10 p.m.

In all of those years, nothing was done. Nothing was collected because the relevant requirements for the implementation of property tax was not put in place. So far, despite several attempts and false starts by Government to implement property tax including the legal action which we in the UNC had to take them to court to block, Minister Imbert and his colleagues have not been able to collect one red cent from property tax. And with three quarter of the financial year already passed—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mr. D. Tancoo:—it seems clear that for one more year, for this financial year, no money would be collected from property tax.

When you consider that the international prices of energy products have fallen and production of energy products have also dropped, it means that the Minister's revenue estimate provided in budget 2023 is going to be substantially lower than expected and that is why we are here today. We are here today so that the Government could use its simple majority, and Minister when he was walking away from the podium was boasting that this just requires a simple majority. This just requires a simple majority and it does. All that is required is for the Government to decide that they want to force this thing down and that is exactly what will happen. They will use their special majority.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: They will use their majority to implement it. This Government then clearly intends to pass this Bill, to sneakily implement property tax on agricultural property, commercial property and industrial property—

Mr. Imbert: Sneakily?

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. D. Tancoo:—without telling this nation a word.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6). What is this “sneakily”? We are right here in front of everybody. They have live TV—

Mr. D. Tancoo: Maybe if you had waited till I was finished with the sentence you would have heard why.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again Member, I am sure you can use a more parliamentary word than that. No! Members, Members, I am ruling. Members. I am sure you can use a better word than that, Member.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you. Thank you. I guess I cannot use “surreptitiously” as

well, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but I think—it is clear.

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

Mr. Imbert: Out in the open.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: No, you cannot use that word either.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, I know you can—please, and we will be able to move on. Quickly. Quickly.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Allow me, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with your leave to move on. The purpose for the Bill here today, the purpose for this legislation, is because of the Minister's failure—

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Mr. Deputy Speaker, Standing Order 48(6). Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member used another word and he has not withdrawn it.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*] what the other word is.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: You think I stupid to say the other word?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members. Yes, again Member, so again just retract it and again you can just move on. I think you did not.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you. Hon Minister, sorry, hon. Sir. I hereby retract the use of the word that seems to have offended you, Ma'am—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo:—and I move on. What this Government has brought Members of Parliament to this Chamber here today to do, is to prop up the incompetence, mismanagement, and complete lack of vision—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—of the Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East, and his entire Government. I trust that none of those words offend the ears of those opposite, because it clearly offends the population of Trinidad and Tobago that that is the kind of language that must be used when referencing the

Minister of Finance.

This is the reason for this Bill, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Having failed to develop new revenue sources for yet another year, having failed to create an enabling environment for investment, having failed to focus and generate economic transformation and national development, the Minister of Finance has resorted to the only policy that he knows, tax, tax, tax. And that is why for the majority of his presentation today, all the Minister could speak about is tax, tax, tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: The Minister in his reference spoke about taxation from all the years gone previously, and referenced other countries that have property tax. I recalled that he referenced United States, taxation in the United Kingdom. He spoke about \$20,000 equivalent that people in Trinidad would have had to pay if the same were being applied, and \$23,000 in the United Kingdom. There is a huge difference between those countries and Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: You know what the huge difference is, Mr. Deputy Speaker? The People's National Movement. Under the People's National Movement we pay for services but do not get it. In those developed countries that he is referencing to justify the property tax that he is planning to implement here, in those developed countries people get the service. They get the service that they pay for. Not in this country.

In this country Trinidadians and Tobagonians pay taxes but we still have the worst roads in our country. We cannot get the roads fixed. We cannot get water. We have problems getting lights. We have runaway crime. We have bees attacking people in this country.

Mr. Young: We have the UNC.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members.

Mr. D. Tancoo: I expect that the hon. Member can join the debate when he so feels fit and I would not be distracted by his rambling and rumblings.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Bill seeks to amend the parent legislation materially in three ways and I will deal with them individually. Clause 3 seeks to amend the definition of annual rental value to include the words “an estimate of” after the word “means”. So that the new clause when amended will read and I quote:

“‘annual rental value’ means an estimate of the annual rent which particular land is likely to attract having regard to the purpose for which land is actually used, occupied or tenanted, or where it is not actually used, occupied or tenanted having regard to the purpose for which it is reasonably suitable”

Three new words, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Three new words, a total of 11 letters, “an estimate of”. That is the size of the amendment, but let me tell you what that does.

The intention of the amendment, as specified even by the hon. Minister himself in his presentation, is to clarify beyond a shadow of a doubt to cement into the legislation and to reinforce this Government’s commitment to taxing citizens into poverty using the concept of fake income on which to base their taxation. Fake income, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And that is particularly true of residential properties. Somebody, somewhere, paid by taxpayers, Mr. Deputy Speaker, has to create the fictitious income that a home can theoretically generate, and then on the basis of that come up with “an estimate of”—the words of clause 3—the annual rent whether the property is rented or not, occupied or not, used or not.

The hon. Minister used an example and I want to refer him back to his own

example. He spoke about a lower income level, a lower classification, and referred to somebody whose property would be valued at around \$3,000 a month. On the basis of that, he said that the annual fee that will be required to be paid on the property tax, if this legislation goes through and is implemented, would be about \$1,000. On the face of it, that sounds like a negligible figure. It sounds like it is not substantial and the Minister and any Ministers behind will divide it by 365 and come to the population and say, “It is a minuscule amount. It is just \$3.00 or so odd per day”—minuscule amount. But that is based on a false concept of rental value. It is based on a false calculation. It is based on the assumption that your property is generating an income and there is something fundamentally flawed with that.

I understand that the Member of Parliament for San Fernando East does not understand economics, so allow me to break it down for him. Allow me to break it down for him.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please Member.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Allow me to break it down for him. It does not matter.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, direct—

Mr. D. Tancoo: Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me. So I have a property, I have a house in which I reside. The hon. Minister will come now under this legislation and determine that my home can now be rented out for, let us say, \$10,000 per month which works out to about \$120,000 per year. And on the basis of that, on the basis of his calculation of what my home could be rented out from, they are implementing a property tax that I must now pay on that.

So the Minister came, stood on the opposite side to me, and spoke about

people are saying that is the capital value. It is only Minister that is saying anything about capital value. The hon. Minister who referenced capital value as one of the things that people are misinforming, it is only him. The problem is not the capital value. The problem is the method of calculation, the theory.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: So in my example, in my home if he estimates that \$10,000 per month is what it is my home could be rented out for and, therefore it is \$120,000 a month, a year sorry, then the tax will be based on 3 per cent of that. But 3 per cent of that proposed income, but my home is not generating any income, Mr. Deputy Speaker. There is no income being generated there. So on what basis is the Minister claiming this fake income?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members. Again, each Member will have the opportunity to enter the debate. I am recognizing Oropouche West at this time.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much for you protection, hon. Sir. The Minister was not comfortable with the legislation as it exists now because the phrase “the annual rent with the particular land is likely to attract” is not sufficiently clear and could be challenged as he needed to emphasize the arbitrariness of “an estimate of”. The Minister claimed that at least \$1.4 billion in property tax was not collected over the last 14 years, at least that it could have been substantial more. But that was not based on fake income. That was not based on a construed, what if. And the legislation is very clear. The legislation is very clear, the existing legislation and the amended legislation. Whether “the land is actually used, occupied or tenanted, or where it is not actually used, occupied or tenanted having regard to the purpose for which it is reasonably suitable”.

My home, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is a residence. It is not a rental property. It is not generating income and, therefore, the basic tenets on which this whole

property tax is based, is wrong in principle, it is unjust—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo:—it is unethical and it is probably illegal and we will find out in due course, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And only the PNM could do this. Only the PNM could put a real tax on fake income and then threaten me with court and jail if I do not pay their tax on fake income.

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Your last couple lines—Members, again. Your last couple lines.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Sure.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please retract your last couple lines and move on please.

Hon Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: Listen, you here long enough to tell them not to speak nonsense.

Mr. D. Tancoo: I absolutely retract. I absolutely retract.

Mr. Deputy Director: Member proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo: I absolutely retract and allow me to rephrase. Only this Government could implement a tax on income that does not exist and threaten as it is in the law, threaten court and jail if the persons who are residents, tenanted or in position do not pay the tax. Whether their properties are rented or not rented, only this Government could tax income that does not exist and penalize citizens if they do not make the payment.

7.25 p.m.

I want to touch as well on another issue that was raised by the hon. Minister and it was also raised in a previous debate to which the Minister also referenced. The property tax that they are referring to here that the “an estimate of”, and it all

falls under the same clause 3, the property tax being referenced here, the Minister is stating it is like everywhere else in the world, it is going to be—well he referenced feudal. I do not know where he gets these things from but the Minister lives in his own palace, in his own—somewhere in the clouds. But the property tax is going to be used by local government bodies, well that is in the legislation. His repeating of that was not necessary but that is in the legislation. They make a big issue about this as if suddenly local government bodies are going to get so much more.

Today, I would like to get the Minister's agreement in his wind up to make it very clear and I want to use an example just for the clarification, if a local government body, if Siparia currently gets \$100,000 in allocation, whatever the figure is and next year, when they took this property tax in place, \$20 million is received in property tax, that is then going to be used by the regional corporation. I want the Minister to say clearly that this Government will not deduct the property tax value from their estimate allocation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: So that it is not going to be a way of balancing it off. The property tax is going to be on top of whatever the allocation is now and not a deception to ensure that the same allocation is being provided to the regional corporations. I want to make it very clear, the hon. Leader of the Opposition has said it before and we repeat it again. We in this Opposition maintain that this property tax as defined, as described, as calculated, and on the basis on which it is calculated and on the basis on which it is done and the procedure with which it is being implemented, it is illogical, unethical, unfair, punitive and very possibly illegal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move on. Clause 4 of the amendment, the proposed amendment, seeks to amend section 7. It is a new section as per 2018 amendment Act to add the words “or 29” after the word “6” as shown below. Mr. Deputy Speaker, again, a very small amendment, four, two letters, two numbers, very small amendment. The new section 7 will now read:

“Where the owner of land in Trinidad and Tobago makes a return of land under section 6...”

And now we are adding “or 29”.

“and the Commissioner is of the opinion on the basis of that return that the land carries an annual rental value of less than eighteen thousand dollars, he shall record the annual rental value as eighteen thousand dollars.”

So what that basically does is to ensure that however you are in possession of the land, whether you are a landowner, an occupier, a tenant, and however the information comes to the Commissioner of Valuations, whether you have filed your regular returns as requested by the law under section 6 or whether the Commissioner asks for additional information under 29, however it is that the information is presented to the Commissioner, the Commissioner decides that if your land has the potential, not real value, has the potential if it for use for whatever purpose the Commissioner of Valuations conceives it to have been, even if it is not being used for that purpose and the annual rental value now is \$18,000 or less, the legislation allows now for the Commissioner to value the property as \$18,000.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is the weirdest thing possible.

Mr. Manning: *[Interruption]*

Mr. D. Tancoo: That is the weirdest thing. Well I—anyway, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me focus. The noise in the background is just that, noise, irrelevant

and ridiculous. What this legislation is telling us, amended as it is, what this legislation is telling us is that we will go through an entire process of estimates and valuations, including the estimate that the Minister himself used of \$3,000, and where an entity is valued at \$3,000 or under \$18,000, so let us say for argument sake, it is valued at \$3,000 a month, \$2,000 a month, \$1,000 a month. In the case of some of my constituents, there are persons who would have built their properties many, many years ago in areas where there was nothing, there was just bush.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, your speaking time has elapsed, you have an additional 15 minutes. Care to avail?

Mr. D. Tancoo: Absolutely. Thank you very much.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Mr. D. Tancoo: So in Suchit Trace for example, where the Government has failed to dredge the rivers there over the last eight years, to widen the river and today, it has failed to implement banks, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I expect that the annual rental value there would be negative because every year, these people get flooded out and nobody wants to come to rent there so the annual rental value there should be negative. What that does mean? That in the immediate vicinity of Suchit Trace, and it is not just in the immediate vicinity “eh” because whenever there is heavy rainfall, floods takes place because of the Oropouche river throughout Oropouche West but in those areas, these people should not have to pay property tax. They should not have to and if they do, it should be a miniscule, miniscule amount and I will come back to that in few minutes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us say for argument’s sake that the Commissioner of Valuations decides that this property now is worth \$1,000 somehow if they were renting it out and people miraculously decided that they wanted to come and rent this flood zone, thanks to the failure of the Government to dredge this river, when

happens then? Somebody whose valuation would have been done and conducted under the Ministry of Finance by the Commissioner of Valuations and the valuation would have been \$12,000, now has their valuation increased artificially again to \$18,000 for taxation purposes. How ethical is even that? When you know that based on what the Minister said, substantial amount of information has come and the Ministry will know and the Commissioner of Valuations will know that the real, it is not a real value but the estimated value if the property was used for renting would have been substantially less than \$18,000. You have the figure. Why then are they coming to raise it? It is a punishment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and this one clearly is designed to punish persons of lower income levels or with properties that have been there for a long time or are in a deteriorated state.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: That is absolute unacceptable.

Mr. Ratiram: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Couva North, just withdraw it please. Just withdraw it quickly please. Just withdraw it.

Mr. Ratiram: I withdraw, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. D. Tancoo: This action of the Government by increasing a valuation that they know to not be true is punitive especially against the poor. They are already charging people an income tax for income that they are not receiving to now raise it higher than the actual figures that they would have come up with is unethical, that is absolutely wrong. This measure made absolutely no sense when it is initially proposed by this Government and widening it is applicability based on clause 4 makes it even less, less sensible.

Under different circumstances, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would have appealed for this Government to make properties valued under \$18,000 or \$36,000 per year

free from income tax or for a rebate of some sort or concession of some sort, to be made but I maintain that this legislation is based on a poor foundation and as such I call on the Minister, it is never too late, to scrap the entire property tax legislation today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: Scrap it. It is punitive, it is illogical, it is unjust and as I said, it is possibly illegal.

And while I am at this, I want to also focus that the Government itself has been punishing citizens and undermining the value, the real value of people's properties. When they fail to clear rivers, when they fail to clear drains and we experience flooding, what that does is reduce the value of property. When they do not deal with crime, it creates hotspots—well Trinidad and Tobago is now an official hotspot—that reduces the value of people's property, it reduces the value of people's homes. When they fail to create jobs, that creates a situation where people can no longer maintain their homes, it reduces the value of people's property. So by the Government's failure, what they are doing is punishing people and deteriorating and destroying and damaging and essentially creating a situation where people's assets, their property, is undervalued and—

Hon. Members: Depreciated.

Mr. D. Tancoo:—depreciated. Thank you very much. And their value has depreciated substantially. And when you drive around Trinidad and Tobago, you see this. You see many, many, many, many homes right now which are in a poor state of disarray. It is easy to predict too that when you now take all of this bunch and throw persons under the 18,000—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, one second. Leader of the House.

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In accordance with Standing Order 15(5), I beg to move that the House continue to sit until the conclusion of the matters before it.

Question put and agreed to.

VALUATION OF LAND (AMDT.) BILL, 2023

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Continue.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Mr. Deputy Speaker, may I be advised on how much time I have left?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: You end just around 7.48.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much. Mr. Deputy Speaker, given the Ministry's determination to raise people's valuation to \$18,000, it is clear that there is going to be a deluge of claims to be brought before the valuation tribunal and today I want to ask the Minister who spoke last on this issue of valuation tribunal during the budget presentation in September last year when he said that the valuation tribunal is being finalized. I quote:

“The valuation tribunal is being finalized...to handle disputes over...”—property valuation—“and will be in place when the first valuation roll is completed.” The tribunal members are “appointed with”—the—“recruitment”—process—“of the chairman”—et cetera, is—“in progress.”

The Minister determined today and he said it today that a lot of things are in place. Thousands and hundreds of thousands of homes, residential properties have already been valued and assessed and they are already on the road to go. Can the Minister indicate the status of this valuation tribunal? And I want to be very

specific with my question to give him the opportunity to respond.

Since they have already set up the tribunal, according to since September last year and they were awaiting the appointment of a chairman, and they have already determined a substantial amount of valuations, the assessments have already been done, has anybody been contacted by the valuation tribunal, by the valuations unit so that they can have clarification as to whether there is a difference between what their estimates have been and what the Ministry estimates have been and therefore they have access to tribunal, they that they have access to the tribunal to query or is the Minister waiting to implement and having implemented, ensure that people pay their tax, comply and then complain which is unfair in itself.

7.40 p.m.

What the Minister should advise is the current status of the valuation department, the Valuation Division, and whether or not persons have been communicated with, to determine whether or not the values that they would have proposed as their estimates are in line or in sync with the Ministry's valuation and therefore whether there is basis for claim for dispute resolution.

There is a reason I am asking that, because based on a cursory look at the Ministry's website, the Ministry of Finance, *valuationdivision.gov.tt*, the last announcement on that website was more than a year and a half old. That this even before the Minister's statement. That brings no sense of comfort to myself or to any taxpaying citizen, especially a property owner, occupier or tenant who now has to face this draconian piece of legislation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am very curious, because the Ministry has been spending millions and hundreds of millions of dollars on this digitalization exercise. And now we are realizing that the Valuation Division, especially given the emphasis that this Government is putting on executing the property tax, the

Valuation Division's website is not up to date. There is a serious issue of concern. Because people should, by now, be able to find out whether their values are in sync and what options they have and what recourse they have for the implementation of the property tax.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I move on, in my few minutes, to clause 5. Clause 5 seeks to repeal the existing section 7A below—and I do not have the time to read it all out—and replace it with a new subsection. The Minister, in his presentation, read out basically what the new subsection is. And just for reference, I want to use one part of it:

“Where the Commissioner is of the view that more than fifty per cent of any of the following categories of land:

- (a) residential land;
- (b) commercial land;
- (c) industrial land; and
- (d) agricultural land,

in Trinidad and Tobago have been valued and that the valuations should take effect, he shall notify the Minister in writing.”

Basically, what that does is move us from where we were before, which was 50 per cent of the residential properties, is what was the trigger for the implementation of the property tax. Now, they plan to use this 50 per cent as the trigger for the implementation of property tax for all classes of land—all classes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is the biggest betrayal of all. It is an attempt to retrofit legislation, created and directed for one criterion; to ask for the use of that criteria to implement on other criteria. That too is legal manoeuvring and misdirection, Mr. Deputy Speaker. By sleight of hand, this Minister proposes to implement the property tax on agricultural land now under this legislation, under

this current legislation before the House. And the Minister spent 10 minutes on that; 10 minutes on that, agricultural land. I wonder if farmers know this? Because while farmers are suffering from praedial larceny, as my colleague here spoke about earlier today, poor infrastructure and the ever-increasing price of raw materials, with an absent Minister of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries, they are now being threatened with property tax. How heartless is that? One per cent, Sir, is substantial for people who are not getting the services that they are expecting, and that they deserve.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Tancoo: You praise these farmers for keeping the country fed during COVID, but instead of addressing the shortfalls caused by failure of this Government, you put a dagger of property tax into their proverbial backs. That is unacceptable.

By sleight of hand, the Minister proposes to implement property tax on uncultivated land. I wonder if persons who have land, not currently under cultivation, not earning a single red cent, I wonder if they know that the taxman is coming, and he will value your land on the basis of some estimate of what could have been grown on there, even though there is nothing growing on it. And there is no guidance. He does not know if he is going to estimate it based on—he is going to estimate a value based on whether bodi is being planted, tomatoes, onion, dragon fruit, baigan, or for the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, we do not know if they are going to be planting chocolates for him to go and pick.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, by sleight of hand, the Minister proposes to implement property tax on commercial properties. I wonder if businesses who are currently reeling under a never-ending spate of crime, confronted with an unpredictable

water supply and impending higher electricity rates, I wonder if they know that property tax is coming now, having spent thousands of dollars—and this is true for both commercial properties and residential properties—to install burglar proofing, camera systems, alarm systems, special reinforced doors, hiring security, buying dogs, et cetera? What you have done, what those persons, residential homeowners and commercial homeowners, what they have done is, because of the Government's failure, they have been forced to spend more money to protect themselves. But unfortunately, what that also does is increase the value of their property, that the Government is now going to eye with “wicked eye, with evil eye, with malicious eye”.

And the same is true for industrial land. Mr. Deputy Speaker, my question is: Has the Minister engaged in any consultation, any discussions with farmers, businesses, members of the manufacturing community, about its plan, manifested in this amendment, small as it is, to impose the property tax immediately on the passage of this legislation—

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

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much—and with the President's assent? Has the Minister done any impact assessment—with all the time that he has had since he has been pursuing property tax, has he done any impact assessment to determine, in the current circumstances, how a new tax will affect ordinary citizens?

When you put additional tax on agricultural products, on agricultural land, on commercial land, and on manufacturing land, all of that is passed on back to the consumers. How much higher will prices climb is an unknown factor. But the fact is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that prices are going to escalate substantially. Because all of those components, all of those lands that the Minister described, has to pass on their cost.

We already have double-digit inflation over the past eight years, and workers being forced to—at least those who are still fortunate to have a job—accept 4 per cent or else. These workers are already suffering from falling purchasing power and now the Government comes to add additional burden on top of burden. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is heartless.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Bill is a symptom of the intellectual laziness and lack of vision of the PNM in general, and this Minister of Finance in particular. While the rest of the world bounces back from COVID and confronts the new challenges facing the globe, Trinidad and Tobago is left to grapple with a visionless Government, with no plan or intention to deal with any issue facing the country.

The Minister's recourse to taxation means that citizens are being forced to pay for the Minister's bankruptcy of ideas. Instead of the Minister creating new revenue streams, creating an enabling environment for investment, transforming the economy, because he has failed to do that, taxation, taxation, taxation. Citizens are being made to pay a bitter price for the incompetence of this Minister. And the same goes for every Minister of that Government, from the Minister of National Security, come all the way down.

I maintain that this property tax is unfair, unethical and unjust. And unfortunately, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I advised you, you had two minutes. I gave you a little leeway.

Mr. D. Tancoo: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member for San Fernando West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Rural Development and Local Government (Hon. Faris Al-Rawi): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is a word that jumps to mind. It is called temerity. You could even use the word temerity as a synonym in Trinidad and Tobago for a word we all know well. It is called “boldfacedness”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we just heard from the Member for Oropouche West who literally said—

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: If Naparima could only hold his infestation of words for a moment. The point that the Member for Oropouche West was saying is that this is a wicked and inequitable tax, and he demands that the entire property tax regime be replaced. He alleged, wrongly, that the Minister of Finance was intellectually bankrupt. And he said we must have greater sources of revenue.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, lest people are tempted to fall for the intellectual dribble that we just did, permit me to remind the population that the Consolidated Fund of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago is the primary source of how people get money. What does that mean? The Government has a bank account created by the Constitution, enabled by the Exchequer and Audit Act, enabled by our income tax laws, our revenue laws, where we collect money, we consolidate it and then we spend it for the benefit of people.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the vast majority of money that is to be collected by a government is only on account of taxation. Unless you are borrowing, you are taxing. And therefore, for an intelligent Member, such as Oropouche West, to stand up and tell this population, our people, “All the Minister doing is taxing, taxing, taxing”, well then, why did you not do anything about it when you were the government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago under Kamla

Persad-Bissessar?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, coming to the definition of “temerity”, do you know what temerity looks like? When you stand up with 29 seats as a government under Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Member for Siparia, and you did not repeal the Property Tax Act. And do you want me to tell you why the Property Tax Act was not repealed? Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you go on any website, on the iPad or phone that the hon. Member for Oropouche West has, paid for by the taxpayers—because his iPad comes from the taxpayers as a result of taxation, as he walks out of the Chamber. Mr. Deputy Speaker, hear this. This is from the Ministry of Finance’s website, “The National Budget 2014”. It is a publication of the Ministry of Finance and the Economy. That is what they used to call it when Howai was there.

“The Minister of Finance and the Economy Senator the Honourable Larry Howai has clarified any confusion citizens may have had regarding the re-introduction of the land and building tax regime.”

Column to the left:

“Land & Building Taxes”.

And I quote with your permission:

“In his Budget Speech on Monday 9th September 2013, the Minister”—and they are referring to Minister Howai—“said...”

And I quote again:

“Mr. Speaker, a land and building tax regime is a key pillar in all modern tax systems. Recurrent land and building taxes meet all the conditions of a good and fair tax. The backbone of a successful land and building tax is the proper valuation of properties within a transparent framework. This will

require the property rolls being brought up-to-date. I proposed two phase-in these taxes over the period 2014 to 2017 during which time the properties will be valued and consultations will be held with all stakeholders.’

“The Minister asserted that there is no intention by this Administration to suggest that this is not a tax on property...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, could the Member for Oropouche West really be an executive member of the United National Congress, of the political party that stood up to defend property taxes via land and building taxes?

Mr. Charles: He is an hon. Member.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you accept the words from Naparima, that this is an hon. Member, and if you accept the words that Minister Howai put on the record in the budget speech that he delivered in 2013, for the fiscal year 2014, Mr. Deputy Speaker, then we should have land and building taxes returned to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. What were land and building taxes? Mr. Deputy Speaker, land and building taxes were repealed in 2009 by the Property Tax Act.

So let us take Oropouche West at his word. Oropouche West says, no taxation; tax, tax, tax is bad. Yet the UNC government, under Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, was well and happy taxing people under land and building taxes.

7.55 p.m.

Secondly, Mr. Deputy Speaker, under the land and building taxes promised that they said they would return, 2013, they saying they will return to property tax in the form of land and building taxes. You know what happened, Mr. Deputy Speaker, by the time the party, and the drinking was done, and the festivity was over, and they “ketch dey self”, and the spirits all gone, they realized the land and

building taxes would cost people more. Because in San Fernando where I come from, that I represent, San Fernando West, the land and building taxes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, was the highest in the country, and people were paying 7 per cent of the capital value of their property.

So Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you took land and building taxes UNC-style and you applied it as Minister Howai, under Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC was saying to do, you would have ended up with 7 per cent of a \$1 million property, \$70,000 a year you have to pay the taxman. You know what happened next, Mr. Deputy Speaker? Oh my gosh, again, when the party, and spirit, and happiness done, Minister returned to the population in 2015 and implemented the same property tax that Oropouche West has the temerity today to come and say he wants repealed.

So let me put the timeline straight, 2009, property taxes were passed, May 24th 2010, in fact today, May 24th, we now stand in 2023, 13 years ago the UNC Government came into office, they entered into office, they sat down on the Property Tax Act, they promised in 2013 that they would repeal the Property Tax Act, and that they would put on the land and building taxes. By the time sobriety hit them, they realize that they were going to pay more money, the average person in land and building taxes, they run away fast, fast, fast, from that and Minister Howai left standing, there all the party done, all the drinking done, and implemented property taxes in 2015.

Today, Oropouche West comes and say, “Oh, repeal the tax, is wicked, is inequitable.” But Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am not moving away from the definition of temerity yet, and let me translate temerity, boldfaceness, Mr. Deputy Speaker, which is probably why Oropouche West left the Chamber. “Cyah take de heat.”

So what happened? Through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I ask the good fresh

faces and intellectual minds opposite me, Barataria/San Juan, I ask Chaguanas West and—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Address the Chair. Again, address the Chair.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: I am addressing the Chair, I said, through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I am asking through you, my colleagues opposite in a debate in this House, I am now asking, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like hon. Members who are going to join this debate to address big point number one, of the Member for Oropouche West.

Mr. Ratiram: Have you declared your interest?

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: What interest I have to declare, I not running no brothel.

Hon. Member: “Oh goood.”

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members, Members, Members! Members, again, I am recognizing San Fernando West, please. Continue.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: So Mr. Deputy Speaker, hear the big point. Taxing people on—

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(4), I would want the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to withdraw that word what he just used in relation to a Member on this side of the House.

Mr. Charles: It starts with “w”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Member, Members, Members, Members, listen all right. It is a process of interpretation, all right, and as far as what the Member was saying it was not in relation to any particular individual. Overruled.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, coming back to the definition of temerity, which I will not withdraw, boldfaceness I will not withdraw. Mr. Deputy Speaker, listen to Oropouche West, big point. Indignation, voice rising, hear Oropouche West, we taxing people on fake income. Right? On their fake income. The

Member then went on to give a ridiculous heartstring kind of example to say, “Listen, people who land getting flooded, they should not be taxed because dey ha no income coming.” The Member stands up and says, “I live in a residence, my residence not earning any income.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I stand here as the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government to remind the Member for Oropouche West that the mere occupation of a home incurs the cost of the Government’s services, and what are the cost of our services? Every property in this country under the local government reform, and under the Municipal Corporations Act, the Public Health Ordinance, Mr. Deputy Speaker, under the Environmental Management Act, under a number of laws have scavenging services, garbage collection, have drainage, have water and sewerage, Mr. Deputy Speaker, outside of the Water and Sewerage Act in terms of payment for those services.

So Mr. Deputy Speaker, the fact that you are in a social contract with the people of Trinidad and Tobago by virtue of our Constitution and our laws, it in fact costs at least \$7 a day to pick up garbage from each home in this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Now let me use the example that the hon. Minister of Finance gave a while ago on the calculation of property tax. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the housing allowance for a senior Cabinet member is \$12,000 a month, \$12,000 a month. That housing allowance is intended to be representative of what super grade housing will be in a country. So you give the Prime Minister \$12,000 a month, the Chief Justice \$12,000 a month and they say, “Listen, yuh cud get that as yuh housing allowance because dais what it will cost you to rent a home for it.” It is a fictitious value.

If you take \$12,000 a month and you apply it to the formula in property tax, which is, annual estimated rental value that is \$12,000 per month multiply by 12

months is \$144,000. Under the Act, you minus 10 per cent for lack of occupation or vacancies. So you minus \$14,400, you multiply by 0.03 to get 3 per cent. And then, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you put that down and you divide it by 12, you are getting \$300-odd per month.

What does that work out to, Mr. Deputy Speaker? The \$324 per month that you paying, divide it by 30 days assuming you have 28, you have 31 days, let us take 30 days, you are paying \$10 per day in property tax. Garbage collection as I have just told you the analysis demonstrates that we are spending anywhere between \$5 and \$7.75 a day, just to pick up garbage three times a week.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the Member for Oropouche to complain about what he calls fake income, I want to ask the Member for Oropouche what is the UNC's suggestion? I read to you from Minister Howai's 2013 budget, his 2014 budget his statement in 2013 that he was reintroducing property tax under land and building taxes. I told you by way of reminder, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that that was in relation to capital value. I told you Mr. Deputy Speaker that they never reintroduced property taxes as land and building taxes, cause when they got sober they realized it was too expensive for people.

So what is the Member Oropouche suggesting? Because Mr. Howai spoke on behalf of Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, in saying:

The Minister asserted there is no intention by this administration to suggestion that it is not a tax on property.

And that is on the Ministry of Finance website, Mr. Deputy Speaker. National budget 2014, Minister of Finance and the Economy clarifying the land and building taxes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, is Oropouche West saying to the population, return capital value? Well, the Minister of Finance is the one I support here, in saying

that the rental value with \$10 a day in property tax is well worth it, and that is for super grade housing. That is a Prime Minister's allowance of \$12,000 a month. The average person is looking at \$3 a day. That is cheaper than the roti wars we had in the Office of the Prime Minister under the Member for Siparia, if you recall that debate.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, local government, under the 2022 municipal corporation's amendment package, section 10 of the Miscellaneous Provisions Act amended the Property Tax Act by inserting a new section 9(a) and that new section 9(a) is very relevant in this debate. Section 9(a) says:

“The Board shall”—

That is the Board of Inland Revenue—

“...where the Assessment Roll has been prepared for a year of tax relative to residential land forward to each Municipal Corporation in relation to its Municipality, the names, addresses and unique identifiers of the owners of land and the amount of tax so assessed...”

It says:

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

I want remind you that the Property Tax Act allows by way of amendment to the Act by order for the Minister of Finance, at a future date when the system is viewed in context to give more than just residential property tax. Why? The system needs to start. What does this Bill represent? This Bill represents the manner in which the Assessment Roll can be populated so that property taxes can begin to go specifically to the local government authorities.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look to the fact that under the local government reform package, we are dealing an enlarged pool of services by

full-time municipal executive council members where they have standing committees to engage in expenditure. Why would anybody in their right mind do what Oropouche West says, which is to return to land and building taxes, to go to a higher capital value?

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the philosophy of this Government is that every person is entitled to pay a little pit bit of tax, obligated under the social contract to pay a little bit of tax, \$3 a day, \$10 a day, every little bit one by one it adds up. We propose by way of the law that we have passed, the 2022 municipal corporations amendments and the other amendments in the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) package, we propose that the money goes to the local government authorities, be spent by the people closest to the ground. And all we hear from Oropouche West today is forgot tax, repeal the tax, do not mind Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC turned down the law.

You think Oropouche West has the courage today, to the political, intellectual, or genuine courage to remind the population that there is an amnesty afoot in taxes? You think the hon. Member will tell the population that there has been a stand still on property taxes pursuant to law? You think the hon. Member will not say that the Minister of Finance has been in deep consultation, and the Government in deep consultation on the establishment of the revenue authority? Because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, “we eh fraid tuh tell the Privy Council yuh know.” On anything, that is how we won section 34, and prove the fraud on the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: At the Privy Council. That is how we won the case of Suraj that upheld the challenges on the laws to keep us alive, which upheld Suratt.

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

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. Silence please. Go ahead.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: I served as the Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs of this country for seven years and entertained no end of criticism, “we go strike down yuh law, all yuh simple majority law, and Suratt cyah stand.” Well you know what? The Privy Council upheld Suratt.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And upheld all of our laws.

8.10 p.m.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what I can tell you is that our government has been tried and tested on umpteen occasions and found to have done the right thing, because people survived, people prospered.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, are these difficult times? Yes. Are people crying out for more? Yes. Do we deserve a caring and hardworking government to be at the beck and call of people? Yes. Do we have the support of the Opposition to do more? No. Can we do deeper constitutional reform to give it the extra push? No. Why, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because you are not inside and the UNC philosophy is if they are not in control, burn down the place, let everybody suffer, “it eh matter”. Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Hon. Member: Ignore it.

Hon. F. Al Rawi: —we have to deal with intellectual lice crawling amongst us.

Mr. Young: Intellectual lice?

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Intellectual lice.

Mr. Hosein: What is that?

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Intellectual lice is, lice that could infect you and cause you troubles if you listen to the wrong people. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would not say Naparima embodies that you know, I would not say that.

Mr. Young: Papa.

Hon. F. Al Rawi: “But I doh know, ah keeping meh distance.” Mr. Deputy Speaker, what I can tell you is that the people deserve money to work for them. Let us talk about that. This year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Minister of Finance in the Appropriation Bill, gave the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government \$386-odd million for PSIP and development, \$21 million in the IDF. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that represented 75 per cent approximately, of what the increase in the cost of fuel at the pump was. Fuel at the pump generated \$500 million more and three-quarter of that money came to local government. Now what do we do with it? We increase the allocations across 14 corporations. And with this amendment to this law, we are taking the valuation of land, we are allowing it to start, we are implementing the call for property, because you know what, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know “why dey afraid it?” Because when people realize that the property tax “eh no bad ting,” that the values are small, that you have a preserved right to object if you want to object, you could go before the Valuation Tribunal, you could go before the Tax Appeal Board, you could go before the High Court. If you looked to the operations of law in the Property Tax Act and the Valuation of Land Act, Mr. Deputy Speaker—the Valuation of Land Act is what we are amending here today—you will realize that you are not stuck with it, you could challenge it. But when people start to realize, hold on, “is \$3 ah day dey are asking for?” And when they realize that with local government reform we are giving the money to the councillors and—Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have had the pleasure of over one year in Rural Development and Local Government and I

am telling you this without fear of contradiction, everybody in the UNC serving in local government wants this because they want the value of it, they want to be able to have the proximity of spend, earn at home and spend at home. But Mr. Deputy Speaker, I challenge any one of them to explain to us how you could earn money for a country, other than by borrowing or taxation.

Mr. Manning: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Because Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we sell matters of oil and gas, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we do not earn the oil and gas sale you know, we take our share by taxes, supplemental petroleum tax, PPT tax, Mr. Deputy Speaker. What foolishness does the UNC portray as logic in this Parliament most respectfully, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to pretend that taxation is not the mechanism “yuh” collect revenue. It is the lifeblood of an economy Mr. Deputy Speaker. The question is: Are you getting value for money in your expenditure? Not intellectual lice, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, when we see Siparia Regional Corporation in 2021, getting \$10 million; in 2023 getting \$43.9 million, splitting the sums between recurrent and PSIP—look at that difference there, \$10 million versus nearly \$44 million, Mr. Deputy Speaker—114 per cent increase from the \$18 million in 2022 and more than that, double that from 2021. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this year I can tell you our PSIP expenditure across the 17 entities that the Ministry of Rural Development manages, we are nearly completely out of money just for the award of contracts to proceed. Because we have improved the manner in which procurement happens and you know what, we have done that including by the proclamation of the property tax—I am sorry of the Public Procurement Act, a very difficult piece of law, lots of complications to be sorted out. It was a courageous decision. Not an easy one to take to turn it on. There are bugs to be

sorted out. But Mr. Deputy Speaker, surely, the valuation of taxes, the valuation of the role, the population of the role, the valuation of land where people can object, can challenge, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but they are not bound to accept is critically important.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, we dream of a better Trinidad and Tobago, we accept that more can always be done but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I would like the hon. Members opposite to just stop it, stop fabricating the truth. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is offensive—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al Rawi: —especially when a simple Google search could catch “yuh”—

Hon. Member: Embarrassing.

Hon. F. Al Rawi: —in an untruth, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a shameful untruth. Imagine that, a six-year-old on a Google search could make a mockery of Tabaquite—of Oropouche West in his contribution. Mr. Deputy Speaker, they need to step up the game.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Property Tax Act was assented to in 2009. It is Act No.18 of 2009. There is an amnesty afoot, there is in disapplication of the law—what does that mean? There has been a waiver, a statutory waiver on successive points from the property tax. We are asking for the commencement of property tax collection by having a valuation role and we are asking for that money to go to the local government councils, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and we are asking for that to be spent by people that represent small pools where the majority wins. Mr. Deputy Speaker, there are some corporations that—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Two more minutes.

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Of full time or extended?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, full time.

Hon. F. Al Rawi: Thank you. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are asking for the people of Trinidad and Tobago to give their local government councillors the ability to spend money at source, we have plainly demonstrated that the property tax at a super grade housing will be probably close to \$10 a day and at a regular house maybe \$3 a day. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we believe that this is good, and just law and I ask you to reject the submissions of Members opposite. I stand in support of this law and I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I recognize the Member—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: —for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I had no intention of joining this debate but after hearing the contribution from San Fernando West, I am compelled to respond to the untruths—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: —and the misinformation or the inaccurate representations of the Member opposite in that contribution that is wanting.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Bill before us is a Bill that is only about five clauses long and it deals with the Government trying to get their hands on the properties of citizens in terms of taxing them through the properties that they lawfully own. Mr. Deputy Speaker, persons in any democratic society would have no problem with paying a tax you know. They will pay the tax if they feel that it is deserving to give to the Government, if they are getting the services of the Government. But when you pay taxes and you do not get services from the Government, people will rebel from paying that tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And we have seen eight consecutive years of this incompetent PNM regime fail to deliver essential goods and services to the people of Trinidad and Tobago Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the rainy season is coming up. You will see people's houses being flooded out for weeks in this country because they fail to clean the watercourses in a timely manner, because they fail to do maintenance throughout the entire year and now want citizens to take out the little money from their savings to pay property tax.

Mr. Charles: To pay rent to [*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, those rents—those property tax, yes will go—as Naparima say, going to pay rents and the \$1 billion in legal briefs.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: This Government told us that they were doing more with less. Mr. Deputy Speaker, now they want more to do less.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They want more to do less. And when I heard San Fernando West, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I understand now why he holds the position of Minister of Local Government and Rural Development. I now understand you know, because there are two separate regimes and what he did was confused the regimes Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I think I have to correct that record here today.

Hon. Members: Yes.

Mr. S. Hosein: Because there are two separate regime of taxation when it comes to land law. There is the land and building tax regime and then there is the property tax regime.

Hon. Member: Tell him.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: The only accurate thing the Member said was in 2009, the old land and building tax regime was repealed and then he went on to talk about Sen. The Hon. Larry Howai, saying that we are going to reintroduce land and building tax, and we are going to charge people \$70,000 per month—per year in property tax. Mr. Deputy Speaker, ridiculous.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Ridiculous. You see, Google, as the Member said, may absolve Members on this side, but I use the Parliament website to bring the facts to this Parliament.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in response to the Member for San Fernando West, there was a Bill called the Land and Building Taxes Bill, 2011. We were going to reintroduce land and building tax not property tax, there is a difference.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And when the Member goes on to say \$70,000—he said that eh, \$70,000 that we are going to charge persons, this is what the Bill says, you know. The Bill says:

“...land

...up to a maximum acreage of 10 acres — an annual tax of \$10.00 an acre or part thereof;”

Hon. Members: [*Inaudible*] salary the Privy Council.

Mr. S. Hosein: “...in excess of 10 acres and up to a maximum of 100 acres — an annual tax of \$10.00 an acre on the first 10 acres and \$15.00 on every acre or part thereof in excess of 10 acres”

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

Mr. S. Hosein: Where in this has \$70,000? I reject that inaccurate, misguided contribution by San Fernando West, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I have to put it on the record that under the Kamla Persad-Bissessar regime from 2010 to 2015, without a single new tax, we built police stations—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: —we built hospitals, we created 50,000 new jobs without a single new tax. And Mr. Deputy Speaker, if they give us the opportunity again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We will do it again, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, so what the Member for San Fernando West is trying to do is confuse two different regimes of land taxation. It was never the intention of any UNC Government to introduce property tax. It is never that. We have to set the record right in this place, Mr. Deputy Speaker, because we owe population, as elected representatives, a duty to give them accurate information and the truth when it comes to the law, Mr. Deputy Speaker. And we know that this Government has problems with following the law. We know that.

The Minister of Finance says that, why are we kicking and screaming? Some people will be paying \$90 per month in property tax, \$1,000 a year or so. I want to take the Member for Diego Martin North/East back in history. He gave us some colonial history. I want to give some contemporary history, Mr. Deputy Speaker, some contemporary history.

8.25 p.m.

In my hand I have an article by Mr. Sean Douglas, dated the 20th December, 2009, and in this article he is quoting one Member from Diego Martin West, hon. Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley, and the article says Dr. Rowley is:

“Rejecting claims that the property tax won’t cause hardship...”

He said, and I quote:

“I know a lot of people for whom \$100 is a lot of money. A lot are struggling to make ends meet.”

This is Dr. Keith Rowley saying this, that \$100 is a lot of money. And then the Minister of Finance is coming to this Parliament today to say, “Forget that, all yuh could pay \$90”. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the Member goes into his constituency and comes into my constituency, he will understand the value of \$90 to a single mother who has to pay rent and take care of her children.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They will understand that, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I go on by quoting from this very same article—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mr. S. Hosein:—that the Member for Diego Martin West is quoted as saying that:

“In my constituency there is anger...”—there is—“...anxiety...”—there is—“...resentment, at both ends of the spectrum.”

This is Diego Martin West, the hon. Dr. Keith Rowley, rejecting the property tax, and then today they come to boast that citizens in this country must be compelled to pay property tax. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we reject the arguments by the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We totally reject them. We reject those arguments. But again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, history is good; history is a good lesson to learn, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we learn a lot. Because in that very debate when they were debating the property tax, you hear—I am going to quote now from that *Hansard* dated the 21st of December, 2009, and the hon. Colm Imbert says this; he said, I quote:

“You heard the Member for Diego Martin West say that the Government squandered the money and that the Government wasted the money. How would he know, he was part of it until—we never heard anything about waste and sqandermania—the hon. Member for Diego Martin West was no longer a Member of the Cabinet.”

Hear this:

“He now has this obsession with UDeCott and Calder Hart. If...every speech of...”—the—“...hon. colleague for Diego Martin West, he is obsessed with UDeCott and Calder Hart.”

He was going on to say, Mr. Deputy Speaker—this is it, he said:

“My colleague is a very passionate man. He has always been a very good speaker and a good orator. He speaks with a lot of strength in his voice, but when you look at the words they do not make sense.”

This is Diego Martin North/East saying this about Diego Martin West, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when Diego Martin West was saying he rejects the property tax—he rejects it. So today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 13 years later, we are in this Parliament trying to pass this law, we are not going to support this Government if they are going to tax the citizens in this manner. We are not going to support them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: It is not very often we join issue with Diego Martin West but today, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are supporting the words of Diego Martin West that he used in 2009 against a PNM regime—against a PNM regime, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

So, you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when you look at this tax and how they are couching this tax and they are selling it to the population, it is not the truth, and I will tell you why, Mr. Deputy Speaker. When you look at clause 5 of the Bill,

clause 5 of the Bill deals with the various categories of land: residential, commercial, industrial and agricultural land. And they are going to use the residential lands—the property tax being generated from residential lands to be retained and utilized by the municipal corporations, and that is their big deal with local government reform. Property tax is a central pillar of their local government reform; there is a central pillar. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you see, I like to do my research, so I went back into the yellow books that we get in the budget, in the *Draft Estimates of Revenue*—

Hon. Member: Not Google.

Mr. S. Hosein: Not Google.

Hon. Member: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. S. Hosein: The books are yellow. And when you look at page 2, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the *Draft Estimates of Revenue*, there is a line item here—page 3—sorry—called Property Tax (Act, No. 18 of 2009), and they are estimated to collect \$50 million for fiscal year 2023. So we assume, based on the budget statement, that the \$50 million is the amount of taxes that will be generated on residential property which will go to local government.

Let us do the math, Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$50 million divided by 14 regional corporations, what do you get?—\$3.5 million per corporation. You see the mamaguy in this whole thing, Mr. Deputy Speaker?—\$3.5 million you are going to collect to give each corporation, if it is equitably distributed—equally distributed. How could that ever reform local government?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: How could it ever reform local government? It is all a mamaguy, Mr. Deputy Speaker, a mamaguy; \$3.5 million can never do that. But what I expected the Minister of Finance to do here today is that if they are retaining

residential properties under the local government system, why did the Minister not give us a breakdown of the number of properties per municipal corporation? He should, because we should understand how much money Chaguanas Borough Corporation will collect. We should know how much money the City of Port of Spain should collect. We should know how much money Princes Town and Point Fortin and Mayaro collects. Because I am sure, Mr. Deputy Speaker—let us look at Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, the industrial park there, the agricultural lands there, that tax is not going towards local government, that is going into the Consolidated Fund so that it could pay for rentals, it could pay for legal briefs, it could pay for consultants who live in Washington, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The words of Diego Martin West in 2009, “squandermania”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: It is squandermania at the expense of the taxpayers of this country. When you learn—when you start maintaining proper drainage, when you start maintaining the roads, then people might feel comfortable in paying a property tax. Mr. Deputy Speaker, \$3.5 million per corporation “cyah” patch pothole in Chaguanas or in San Juan/Barataria.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: It cannot. It cannot do that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is all a mamaguy. They are trying to set up the population by saying, property—hear what they are saying here now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, when they go on a platform, “Property tax goes towards local government.” They are not saying, “Residential property tax going towards local government,” you know. There are making the population feel as though all of the property tax is going towards local government, but the Government is keeping the majority of the taxes because you understand it is 6 per cent on commercial property and industrial property.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, while the residential properties are 3 per cent, that is all that goes to the regional corporations. So it is a total mamaguy, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, you know, I do not wish to speak very long on this debate because there has been much public commentary on this, and I think the population understands this Government and that they are incompetent in very single way, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But I looked at the demeanour of the Minister of Finance while he was piloting this Bill and he was very calm—

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]—watching me—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. S. Hosein: No, he was very calm. He was very calm. I observed his demeanour. The Minister was very calm. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you can see the child inside of him, excited to introduce a new tax. He was salivating, it was a mouth-watering tax for the Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: He cannot wait to tax the people of Trinidad and Tobago. He cannot wait to tax the people.

Mr. Scotland: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Member: Standing Order. Standing Order.

Mr. Scotland: —is the hon. Member now a psychologist?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Okay. Member—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Charles: What Standing Order is that?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Okay. I have ruled. I have ruled.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. Naparima, I have ruled. Proceed.

Mr. S. Hosein: But I know the Minister will be his natural way when he winds up this contribution, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, 13 years ago on this very night—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—we were not in the Red House, we were in Rienzi Complex celebrating the election of the first female Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, the Member for Siparia—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: —and one of the central points in that campaign was property tax. And just like the population rejected them 13 years ago on this issue, they will reject them again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay. I recognize the Member for San Fernando East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Hon. Brian Manning): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we are here today for the Valuation of Land Act to make provision for the valuation of land, for taxation rating, other purposes, for other matters connected therewith and incidental thereto. Mr. Deputy Speaker, in the interest of time, I will confine my discussion, or my contribution, sorry, to the annual rental value and the definition that is given within this Bill.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I listened closely to the Member for Oropouche West and I have to say, it had to be one of the more painful times I have spent within this Chamber. The Member for Oropouche West does not seem to understand what is going on. There are POB students in this country that can explain—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning:—exactly why it is we are using the annual rental value to

assess property tax—there are POB students. But clearly, the Member for Oropouche West did not have that day in school, but fortunately for him, he has me to edify him.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the annual rental value, the reason why that is used is because it encompasses all the factors that gives a property its value. That is why you use the annual rental value. Well, let me remind the people of Trinidad and Tobago exactly what it is the property tax is, how they are going to be assessed by the Commissioner of Valuations. The applicable tax rate is applied to the annual rental value on agricultural property, that is 1 per cent of the annual rental value; residential property, that is 3 per cent of the annual rental value, not the capital cost of the property, the annual rental value; for commercial property, it is 5 per cent of the annual rental value; for industrial plant and machinery housed in a building, it is 6 per cent of annual rental value; plant and machinery not housed in a build, that is 3 per cent of annual rental value. There are those on the other side that continue to try to mislead this population into thinking—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning:—that the tax rate is going to be on the overall value of your property. That is absolutely absurd, and the Member for Oropouche seems to take great delight in trying to mislead this country with the same false narrative over and over and over.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, some time ago in this very Chamber, the Member said that—and I think today he also repeated something similar, that property taxes were like granny paying taxes on rental income that she did not receive. I received so many calls from so many financial professionals who were aghast that someone who claims to be the shadow Minister of Finance could make such a ridiculous

statement.

Now, let me explain, the annual rental value encapsulates all of the factors that give a property its value. Let me list some of those factors. The factors which give a property value, we have first, location, of course; property size, useable space; we have age, condition of property; upgrades, updates; supply and demand; comparable real estate value; we have planning/building regulations; interest rates, renovation potential; and economic factors. There are three ways for valuing real estate in finance. Any financial student would tell you that; three ways. It is called the cost method, a sales comparison method and, of course, finally, the income method. That is the method under which the annual rental value would fall under.

Mr. Imbert: Talk slowly.

Hon. B. Manning: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]—you “ent” making sense.

Hon. B. Manning: The cost—not to you I would make sense, Naparima. You would not get it. Sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

8.40 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members please. San Fernando East is on the floor.

Hon. B. Manning: I crave your protection, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

With the cost method, you would first value the land, then value the market value or replacement cost of the property based on current construction costs and standards, and should include any builder or developer’s profit. That is the cost method. That is essentially taking the cost of every input into a property, whether it is nails, wood, concrete, doors, whatever, getting the market value of that item and then adding it up and saying this is the value of my property.

How would that be possible? How would the Commissioner of Valuations

value almost, I think, 400,000 residential properties that the Minister of Finance spoke about earlier? How would he do that? How would an average citizen of Trinidad and Tobago value their own properties using the cost method?

Next we have the sale comparison method. The sale comparison method is based on the premise that a buyer would pay no more for a property than others are paying for similar properties in a current market. It is what a buyer would pay in an arm's length transaction in a current free market. So now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what you are being asked to do is to find a property that is similar to yours somehow, find out what the recent sale value of that property was, and then use that to assess the value of your own home. How practical is that? Of course it is impractical.

The Member would come here, he would say all sorts of things about the annual rental value but, of course, he gives us no idea as to how it is he would assess property values in Trinidad and Tobago, because the annual rental value is the most convenient, simplest and transparent way of valuing properties in Trinidad and Tobago. That is why it is being used by the Commissioner of Valuations and this Government. Please do not be misled by those who either do not know what they are saying, or are intentionally trying to mislead the people of this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: So, also the Government was accused earlier of wanting to somehow deceive the population into, or secretly somehow trying to pass the property taxes in Trinidad and Tobago. From the very beginning, and it is obvious, that this Bill is designed to pave the way for the re-introduction of property taxes into Trinidad and Tobago. This Government has said that from the very beginning, and we maintain that. Those taxes are essential, and I believe that most citizens of

Trinidad and Tobago understand why these taxes must be implemented. Also part of local government reform, property taxes are going to be dedicated towards provided local government services in Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you may ask, why it is that mostly property taxes are being used for that. It is because homeowners, or property owners in Trinidad and Tobago, benefit the most from local government services. Without the provision of roads, drainage, sewage, cutting grass, spraying for mosquitoes, homeowners would be unable to enjoy the use of their property. That is why the revenues from those properties are being used for local government services. It is nothing surreptitious about that, it is obvious, it is plain. There are many parts of Trinidad and Tobago, if local government did not spray for mosquitoes, you could not enjoy the use of your home. You could not enjoy the use of your property. So since you are enjoying most of the benefits from these services, clearly some payment will have to come from you.

Earlier, and I believe the Member for Oropouche West scoffed. He scoffed at the calculation. The Minister of Finance spoke about the percentages used, and I will use an example for San Fernando East. By now I have been in office for almost two years, and I have met with thousands of residents, because I actually attend my office hours, unlike Oropouche West, and I have met thousands of residents.

Hon. Members: No, no, no, no!

Mr. Tancoo: 48(6), 48(6). He is imputing improper motives to me. I attend my office. I do not know where he is living.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, no. Member, Member, again, I do not relates directly to the debate, so kindly withdraw and continue.

Hon. B. Manning: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I withdraw. No problem.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Hon. B. Manning: So I have met with thousands of constituents of San Fernando East, and I can tell you that the average rental range is somewhere between \$2,000 to \$3,000, because that is the average rent, I would say, paid by renters within the constituency, from my meeting with thousands of residents and hearing exactly what it is they are paying.

So on residential tax rates, the residential rate—if you take at the high end, which is—*[Interruption]* Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am having difficulty.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. Let us get some silence. It is getting late into the evening, again. Proceed.

Hon. B. Manning: So let us say take it at the high end, say 3,000 monthly. That is an annual rental value of 12 by \$3,000, \$36,000 annually.

Hon. Member: *[Inaudible]*

Hon. B. Manning: Correct. That is the value to be used to assess property taxes, and the rate on residential property would be 3 per cent. That means that the total annual property tax paid on most properties on the high end would be just over \$1,000, which comes up to around \$90 monthly. The Member for Oropouche West even complained about the \$18,000 at the lower level. When you do the calculation, \$18,000 at the lower end adds up to just over \$500 annually in property taxes. That is what the Member is calling draconian, \$500. Yes, he is saying that that is too much and would put poor people on the street, and that is not the case. *[Interruption]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please, please.

Hon. B. Manning: They come to this Chamber week after week and complain that the various corporations are not receiving the funding that they need, but not a single time do they ever propose exactly where such funding should come from.

Not one time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: The Member for Barataria/San Juan earlier—[*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again. Member, please.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hello, Member. I am on my legs, Caroni Central. I am on my legs Caroni Central.

Mr. Ram: What about Port of Spain North?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, I am on my legs. I recognize the Member for San Fernando East. Continue.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I crave your protection.

So, yes, we were speaking, before I was so rudely interrupted, that they never offer any kind of alternative for funding. The Member for Barataria/San Juan spoke earlier and said that during their time in office that did not have any property taxes, and they were able to build police stations and whatever and whatever and whatever. That is because they buried this country up to its eyeballs in debt in the middle of falling energy revenues.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: That we are still trying to dig ourselves out right now in the Ministry of Finance. We have been digging ourselves out of a hole of debt, created by those on the other side, during their time in office, and we have been diligently doing so. The IMF recently gave us a clean bill of health, and also endorsed the fiscal measures implemented by the Minister of Finance and the Ministry of

Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: But that is what a sensible PNM Government would do, and that is why we are in office almost 10 years now, and it does not matter what they do on the other side, or what misinformation they spread, the people of this country do not trust the UNC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: So whatever misinformation they want, at the end of the day I believe the average citizen, the average homeowner in this country understands that property taxes are reasonable. Countries all over the world have property taxes, and many of them also use the annual rental value. I believe the Minister of Finance earlier spoke of several countries in the OECD. Australia, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom, China, India, Thailand, they all have property taxes and they all use the annual rental value, because it makes sense. It is transparent. It is simple to calculate and it is easily understandable for those who want to understand it.

If there is any issue, there is the Valuation Tribunal where you can freely go and say like, I do not endorse or believe that the valuation set by the Commissioner of Valuations is accurate, and it can be looked at by an independent tribunal so that the proper rate can be assessed. It is as simple, transparent process, nothing difficult. Yet every week, the Member for Oropouche West would come here and say things that would have financial professionals in this country laughing themselves to death. We have financial professionals messaging me and calling me and asking, what is this man talking about, and I could not tell them. He said tax on granny's—

Ms. Haynes: Mr. Deputy Speaker, regrettably, 55(1)(b), the Member is now

repeating himself from earlier in the debate. He has repeated the Minister of Finance. It is too late for this much repetition, too much.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member please.

Hon. Member: “Make ah point.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes, make your point.

Hon. B. Manning: I am wrapping up, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It does not take long to shred the thin arguments being presented by Oropouche West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. B. Manning: So let me remind you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, property taxes will be assessed using the annual rental value, not the capital value of the property. That is simply false, and it is something that has been repeated over and over by those on the other side. It is not true. It is easy to calculate. It is convenient. It is transparent and simple. The annual rental value is used because it encompasses all of the factors that give a property its value. And you do not have to go add up every nail, and every plank of wood, and every tile in your home to come up with a property value, which will be utterly ridiculous.

Property taxes and the annual rental value will be used to support local government services, strictly dedicated to local government services and improve the lives of citizens across Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is what a responsible government would do, and that is what this PNM Government would do, and I thank you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Finally. Mr. Deputy Speaker, this has been a very painful debate to listen to, very, very painful.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: I heard the Member for Naparima mutter—he muttered: “Do dey have property tax in Singapore?”

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

Hon. C. Imbert: So I decide, since he loves—since that hon. Member so love Singapore, I said to myself let me go and check. So in Singapore—in Singapore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they do have property tax. I regret to inform my hon. colleague that there is a property tax in Singapore. So when he goes to Singapore—because I know he wants to go there, the hon. Member—he will have to property tax. Barbados has it too.

And this is instructive, it goes to the point the Member for San Fernando East was just making. Annual property tax in Singapore—and this is from the website of the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore—is calculated by multiplying the annual value of the property, with the property tax rates that apply to you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just heard the hon. Member sotto voce across the floor say, “Not annual rental nuh”, so let me go now to the link on the website of the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore. The definition of “annual value” that is used by the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore for property tax is as follows:

“The AV of buildings is the estimated gross annual rent of the property if it were to be rented out.”

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. Member: “Singapore, yuh happy?”

Hon. C. Imbert: Let me repeat that:

“The AV of buildings is the estimated gross annual rent of the property if it were to be rented out.”

Mr. Young: “And he like Singapore.” [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members. Go ahead Member.

Hon. C. Imbert: You know what is interesting? The Singapore Authority says:

“The...AV is determined...regardless of whether the property is owner-occupied, vacant or rented out.”

That is what is done in Singapore.

Hon. Member: “Nah man, I doh believe it. Ah doh believe it.”

Hon. C. Imbert: And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they went on to explain that the concept is that you estimate what the rent would be, whether or not the property is occupied. It is what the rent would be.

8.55 p.m.

So let me go now—

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: That is exactly what you want. Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me go now to the semi-incoherent contribution—

Hon. Member: “Oh-goooud”.

Hon. C. Imbert:—of the hon. Member for Oropouche.

Hon. Member: West.

Hon. C. Imbert:—they are all the same. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Oropouche West said that this annual rental value that we are using is fake; it is based on a false concept. Well obviously the Singaporeans must be engaging in fakery and falsity. So this is the response.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: There is no—Mr. Deputy Speaker, could you ask the hon. Member to stop?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yeah, okay. Members, again please, in silence, in silence.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—can you get them to stop?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: I know the Member is upset because if he went to Singapore he would have to pay property tax and a hefty one too.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: In Singapore, the property tax is 10 per cent of the annual rental value, 10 per cent.

Mr. Charles: Would you give way for one second?

Hon. C. Imbert: No, in Singapore, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Charles: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, no Naparima. Member for Naparima, he has not given way. Proceed.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you. The tax rate for property tax in Singapore is 10 per cent; in Trinidad and Tobago it is 3 per cent. Now, there is no false concept of annual rental value. It is a well-established concept by the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. It is used in multiple jurisdictions around the world. Most recently in this region it has been used by Barbados, the annual—oh, that is the other place he wants to go to.

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

Hon. C. Imbert: The annual rental value is the amount for which the space you—
Mr. Deputy Speaker it is important that hon. Members—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: —and I ask, Mr. Deputy Speaker, get them to just calm down,

Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

they have to be educated. The annual rental value is the amount for the space which you occupy, the typical rent of the space which you occupy. It does not necessarily equal the rent actually paid. It represents the prevailing rents for similar spaces in the rental market. Let me say that again. The annual rental value represents the prevailing rent for similar typical spaces in the rental market. The Member for Oropouche East also said that this Government is going to jail people if they do not pay property tax. There is no custodial sentence in the Act, none. It is just a fine, there is no custodial sentence, none!

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The Member for Oropouche West or East or whatever the hon. Member is—

Hon. Member: West.

Hon. C. Imbert:—went on and said, it is illogical, it is unethical, but Mr. Deputy Speaker, the reality is that in at least 100 countries in the world—

Hon. Member: Nah.

Hon. C. Imbert:—100, the annual value is the tried and tested and established method of valuation for property tax assessment in 100 countries. In the Caribbean alone, eight of the 13 Caribbean countries that impose property tax use the annual rental value. So everything they said on that side was wrong, every single thing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And Mr. Deputy Speaker, I did not even have to say that, I could just say, they spoke as usual.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So the point is, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Hon. C. Imbert: The point is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is necessary to repeat, that

if an ordinary person, a blue-collar worker, a bus driver, dock worker living in England not if, it is a fact that when you live in a typical house, two bedroom flat your property tax, your council tax, as it is called over there, is the equivalent of TT \$20, 000 a year; \$20, 000. In our country, the property tax that the same person, same income level, same type of accommodation will pay, is in vicinity of \$1,000/ \$1, 200 a year. So in Trinidad and Tobago our tax is 1/10 or even 1/20 of what it is in the metropolitan countries for same type of person at the same income level. I made the point that in the United States, the property tax for your typical household is US \$3,700 a year, TT \$25,000. We are asking people to pay \$1, 000.

And the hon. Member for Barataria insisted that I had to come here and give information on what kind of taxes the corporations will collect. What kind of taxes? The hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan ranted and raved and said it is only \$3 million for corporations. Well I did some simple calculations. If there are 600,000 properties and you divide that by the 14 corporations and you then apply that to the \$3 million that he spoke about, it means the property tax that each one of those people will be paying, homeowners, is \$100 a year. A \$100 a year if we use the calculations by the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan; \$100 a year. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan screamed and complained that that \$3 million that the corporations will get is not enough, it is a pittance. Well I could tell you, if \$3 million is not enough, it is a pittance, it is chickpeas, whatever you want to call it, well let us take the \$3 million from your corporations and give them to our corporations—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—because we will definitely be able to use that \$3 million. But more importantly—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—more importantly.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, no. Minister of Finance, go ahead.

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have never heard such twaddle as I heard in this honourable—

Hon. Member: Twaddle?

Hon. C. Imbert: Twaddle—as I heard in this hon. House today.

Ms. Ameen: Is that a Parliamentary word?

Hon. C. Imbert: Twaddle, twaddle. The hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan in his contribution says, this is a punitive, oppressive, wicked, evil tax—or maybe that was the Member for Oropouche West.

Hon. Member: Oropouche West.

Hon. C. Imbert: But when you work it out at the \$3 million per corporation that Member for Barataria is spurning and saying, that is nothing, it is \$100 a year, \$8 a month. So \$8 a month is wicked, evil and oppressive? Mr. Deputy Speaker, they speak out of both sides of their mouth. They want more, and more, and more. Every time we come in a Standing Finance Committee they want more, more money for this corporation, more money for that corporation, more for roads, more for drains, more for garbage collection, more for water trucking. They want more and more and more and more for each one of their corporations. But they do not want a revenue stream for all at that expenditure and all those services. As I have said before, if we are going to improve the level of service in corporations, proper garbage collection, corporations will have an income stream to fix roads, to clean drains, what are they going the use to procure those services? Are they going to procure them with jumbie beads?

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Obviously they have to use Trinidad and Tobago dollars. Obviously.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And Mr. Deputy Speaker, my staff were listening to the twaddle, from the hon. Members opposite and let me just say, based on the information received so far, so far—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

9.05 p.m.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the staff in the Valuation Division—in answer to the question asked by the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan—“Saria”—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: —the staff in the Valuation Division have done some quick calculations based on the information already in their possession. And based on this, based on the properties that have registered and so on, I can say that the Regional Corporation of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, when all residential properties have been valued, will be in receipt of \$44 million; \$44million. The Regional Corporation of Penal/Debe—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please, Members. Go ahead.

Hon. C. Imbert: Right. The Regional Corporation of Penal/Debe, when all properties in that region have been valued and taxes paid, will get \$35 million a year. The Regional Corporation of Tunapuna/Piarco, being one of the more populated corporations, will get \$67 million a year. So it not chickpeas. It is not peanuts. It is a trivial sum of money. It is a substantial revenue stream, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

Hon. C. Imbert: A substantial revenue stream. The Borough of Chaguanas is estimated to get \$52 million from property tax. And you see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they do speak out of two sides of their mouth. As I give the numbers, which put paid to the untruth that it is only \$3 million, and they hear that the Borough of Chaguanas is in line to get \$52 million, if they do their work—because the corporations have to go and collect this tax. This is local at in the purest level. The tax is collected by the corporations, retained by the corporations, and spent by the corporations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So if the Borough of Chaguanas does its work and it ensures that all the residential properties in that borough are valued, then they are in line to collect \$52 million a year. And as I said that, the Member for Barataria/San Juan said, “Make sure they get it, eh.” Mr. Deputy Speaker, it just shows they do not understand, the tax is collected by the corporation itself. It is not coming the central government. It is a purely local exercise. It is not a question of the Government giving the corporation the \$50 million or the \$40 million. It is the corporations themselves doing the work to value—make sure properties are valued and collect them.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this is all very tedious. We have been at this exercise for over 13 years; over 13 years. I heard the Member for Oropouche West said, “Has the Government consulted with everybody who would be affected by this?” Thirteen years of consultation. You want more than that? And furthermore—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And furthermore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I am certain, as the Member for San Fernando West has said, that the regional corporations and

municipal corporations that are currently controlled by the Opposition are only waiting for this process to commence so that they can get this revenue stream to provide services to the people in their areas.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, in every country in the world there is something similar to property tax. You could call it what you want. You could call it land and building tax, you could call it council tax, you could call it property tax. It is what it is. It is in every country in the world. It is a tax that is used for the benefit of people who live in municipalities, in local government bodies. It is collected by the local government bodies, by the cities, by the regions throughout the world—collected by the local government bodies and used to provide infrastructure and services to the people that live in those regions.

We have been at this for too long. The other side has a strategy, they scream and they carry on. I heard one of them say that, “We never imposed a tax and when we get back into government we will do it again.” Well, I think there is something else they are going to do again, it would not be—

Dr. Rowley: Empty the Treasury.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, it will be emptying the Treasury again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: That is what they will do again.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: And that is why we will make sure they cannot get the opportunity to empty the Treasury again, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So that this exercise—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Okay, Members, silence.

Hon. C. Imbert:—has one purpose, it is to give regional corporations a dedicated revenue stream to provide the services that our citizens have been crying out for, for so long. It is ridiculous to try and frighten people, and tell them they will have to pay \$15,000 and \$20,000 in property tax, when it is really \$900 and \$1,000. When people get their assessments then they will know of the level of untruths that Members opposite have spoken on this matter.

I beg to move, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.

House in committee.

Mr. Chairman: Hon. Member, this committee of the whole is now called to order. Welcome to the Parliament, senior executives from the Ministry of Finance.

Clauses 1 to 5 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

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

Mr. Chairman: Thank you for your time.

House resumed.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Question put: That the Bill be now read a third time.

Hon. Member: Division.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Right. A division has been called, the Clerk will take the vote at this time.

The House divided: Ayes 18 Noes 14.

AYES

Robinson-Regis, Hon. C.

Rowley, Hon. Dr. K.

Imbert, Hon. C.

Young, Hon. S.

Hinds, Hon. F.

Al-Rawi, Hon. F.

Beckles, Hon. P.

Webster-Roy, Hon. A.

Cudjoe, Hon. S.

Gadsby-Dolly, Hon. Dr. N.

Gonzales, Hon. M.

Mc Clashie, Hon. S.

Cummings, Hon. F.

de Nobriga, Hon. S.

Leonce, Hon. A.

Manning, Hon. B.

Morris-Julian, Hon. L.

Scotland, K.

NOES

Lee, D.

Charles, R.

Ameen, Ms. K.

Indarsingh, R.

Padarath, B.

Hosein, S.

Rambally, D.

Bodoe, Dr. L.

Ram, A.

Ragbir, Dr. R.

Tancoo, D.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence, Members.

Division continued.

Mohit, Ms. V.

Ratiram, R.

Seecheran, Dr. R.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence, Members. Members, silence.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Leader of the House.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Mr. Deputy Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday the 26th of May at 1.30 p.m. Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is Private Members' Day. May I ask the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre what we will be doing?

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. We will be doing Motion No. 1 in the Private Members' Business on the Order Paper today.

Privilege Matter

(**Sen. The Hon. Reginald Armour SC**)

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, as I announced earlier in today's proceedings, at the last sitting, the Member for Barataria/San Juan—

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, as I announced earlier in today's proceedings, at the last sitting, the Member for Barataria/San Juan raised a Matter of Privilege, and I indicated at the time that I would reserve my ruling for a subsequent sitting.

9.20 p.m.

The Member for Barataria/San Juan has alleged that on May 05, 2023, during a meeting of the Standing Finance Committee, the Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs deliberately misled this House when he stated, among other things, that he provided this House with a summary listing of names of attorneys. Members, the willful or deliberate misleading of the House is a grave contempt as it abuses the privilege of free speech and lowers the dignity of the House by bringing it into odium and ridicule. For this reason, when deciding whether a prima facie case of breach of privilege has been established on the ground of willful misleading of the House the Chair must be satisfied not only that the misleading occurred but that there is something in the nature of the actions on the part of the Member that suggests an intention to mislead.

Members, earlier in today's sitting, the Attorney General by way of his personal explanation stated that his comments which led to this matter of privilege being raised were made with reference to documents which had been provided to him and which were in his possession during the deliberations of the Standing Finance Committee. He admitted to inadvertently and incorrectly stating that the information had been provided to the Parliament and further explained that the error was neither deliberate nor intended to mislead this honourable House. The Attorney General also apologized to the Member for Barataria/San Juan and to this House for his statements.

Hon. Members it will be remiss of me not to use this opportunity to remind

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you that when assurances, promises and undertakings are given by Ministers on the floor it falls within their personal responsibility to ensure that the information being delivered to the House is accurate and complete and most importantly that the information is in fact delivered.

Members, I am satisfied with the explanation and the apology of the Attorney General in relation to this issue and I am equally satisfied that this explanation was done at the earliest opportunity as is our practice. I therefore rule that the matter referred to the Chair of this House by the Member for Barataria/San Juan does not constitute a prima facie breach of privilege warranting its referral to the Committee of Privileges and I so rule.

MOTIONS ON ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members there are three matters that qualify to be raised on the Motion for the Adjournment. However the Member for Tabaquite has asked for those matters to be deferred to the next sitting. So I will now put the question on the adjournment.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 9.23 p.m.