

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Monday, March 18, 2024

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the hon. Stuart Young, MP, Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, who has requested leave of absence from today's Sitting of the House. The leave which the Member seek is granted.

PAPERS LAID

1. Property Tax (Deferral of Assessed Tax Application Form) Regulations, 2024. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]
2. Notification of the Minister of Finance, in respect of the appointment of Mrs. Patsy Latchman-Atterbury, to the office of Director General of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. Notification of the Minister of Finance, in respect of the appointment of Mrs. Helen Thomas-Brown, to the office of Deputy Director General – Domestic Tax of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. Notification of the Minister of Finance, in respect of the appointment of Mr. Riad Juman, to the office of Deputy Director General – Customs and Excise of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
5. Audited Financial Statements of the Deposit Insurance Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2023. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

UNREVISED

6. Second Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Point Fortin Borough Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2004. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
 7. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Sport and Culture Fund for the year ended December 31, 2010. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
 8. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Sport and Culture Fund for the year ended December 31, 2011. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
- Papers 5 to 8 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.*
9. 2017 Annual Report on the National Forensic DNA Databank (NFDD) Custodian Unit Operations. [*The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds)*]
 10. 2018 Annual Report on the National Forensic DNA Databank (NFDD) Custodian Unit Operations. [*Hon. F. Hinds*]
 11. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Health to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (including the THA) on an Inquiry into the efficiency and effectiveness of the Pesticides and Toxic Chemicals Inspectorate. [*The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]

URGENT QUESTIONS

Gun Crimes in Port of Spain Police Division

(Measures to Address)

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. To the Minister of National Security: Given that five persons were murdered at

Harpe Place, Port of Spain, last Saturday, will the Minister indicate the measures to be implemented to address the increase in gun crimes in the Port of Spain Police Division?

Madam Speaker: The Minister of National Security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you. Madam Speaker, the Port of Spain Division is one of 10 divisions across Trinidad and Tobago, and the problems subsist across the board. The incident that took place last week, of course, was horrendous, a very violent explosion that cost us five lives, including that of a police sergeant, and I extend condolences to the family members.

There are several strands to this problem, Madam Speaker. What we are doing, have been doing, boosted up our international cooperation. We have found that the majority of the weapons that contribute to this sort of thing are coming from the United States. We have been working with the Government of the United States, where guns are sold legally, and we are trying to deal with it, with their support, the inflow of them in Trinidad and Tobago. They have assisted us in our border protection. We have gotten equipment from international agencies for ballistic testing and that sort of thing. UNLIREC is one of them.

The other issue, Madam Speaker, is the community. We have put in place the GRACE programme and the Government, in its whole-of-government approach, whole-of-society approach, is spending a lot of time and money strengthening and making the communities more resilient, and that is very important.

Meanwhile, the police is focusing on the gangs, using the anti-gang law, and dealing with that sort of thing, getting at them, targeting prolific offenders known

to the police. And, of course, Madam Speaker, the Commissioner has stepped up patrols, static patrols, mobile patrols, foot patrols, and offering counselling to the people in that particular community and in all communities where this sort of thing subsist.

So, Madam Speaker, there are several strands to the problem and those are some of the approaches that the police are taking with the support of the Government to treating with the problem as identified in the question. I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. In addition, could the Minister indicate whether, given the savage and gruesome attack witnessed on the Saturday last, provisions have been made for providing counselling and support, particularly to children who may have witnessed this first hand?

Hon. F. Hinds: It may have escaped Oropouche East, but I did say in my opening response to the Member that the police have sent out the Victim and Witness Support Unit and they are providing counselling, as they do, around the place. What does not help, Madam Speaker, is some unwieldly politician jumping in the middle of the incident and disrespecting with the use of very inclement and indecent language in the middle of all of that, politicking as one of his colleagues did. We are doing the things that a right-thinking professional police organization must do, and that is how we respond to this situation, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you very much. And Minister, I am happy you went there. In the context of the *Express* editorial today that characterized your statements as vacuous and meaningless—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal:—could you indicate whether it is your intention to visit this particular area, given this heinous crime that has been committed, to offer some type of assurances to those people that justice will be served?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member, having regard to the original question asked, the answers given thus far, this deals with the Port of Spain Police Division, that question is out of order in accordance with the Standing Orders.

ORAL ANSWER TO QUESTION

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you, again, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there is one question for oral response and we will be answering that question.

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East.

Ravine Sable Road, Longdenville, Irregular Water Supply

(Measures to Alleviate)

39. Dr. Rishad Seecheran (*Caroni East*) asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:

Will the Minister indicate the initiatives that the Water and Sewage Authority will implement, to alleviate the irregular water supply provided to the residents of Ravine Sable Road, Longdenville?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Public Utilities.

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, Ravine Sable Road, Longdenville, is located in WASA's Ravine Sable supply zone which comprises of four distinct areas: Ravine Sable proper, Koosyal Road, Ravine Sable sand pit and Hilltop. The

area has an estimated population of 39,656 residents and is supplied with a pipe borne supply from the Carlsen Field Water Treatment Plant, which is serviced by nine wells in the Carlsen Field well field. The Carlsen Field Water Treatment Plant also serves five other schedule zones including: La Quesa, Arena, Carlsen Field proper, Nadira Gardens, Christian Village and Cashew Gardens. At present, the estimated supply/demand deficit for the entire Carlsen Field/Ravine Sable supply zone stands at 2.0 imperial million gallons of water per day. And as a consequence, each of these areas operate on a rotating water schedule of one in every seven days or 24/1 under normal operating conditions.

In early January, the Ravine Sable area experienced a disruption in the water supply due to a technical problem experienced at the plant. Since then, the plant has been returned to full functionality and there has been a restoration of the regular schedule water supply to the area. Madam Speaker, the challenges confronting the water sector relating to ageing infrastructure, climate change and the augmentation of the supply-demand imbalance, as a result of the extension of the distribution network into new areas, as a result of the growth in communities and new housing developments, considerable strides have been made over the last three years, ensuring the population is provided with a safe, reliable and adequate supply of water.

However, there are some areas, particularly at the extremities of the water distribution system, where communities are in receipt of a pipe borne water supply of less than 24/3. In order to address the supply-demand imbalance in the Carlsen Field/Ravine Sable supply zone, Madam Speaker, WASA has significantly advanced plans to develop new surface and groundwater sources, including from the Ravine Sable sand pit. This is expected to increase production by an additional 2.1 imperial million gallons of water per day.

Additionally, the Carlsen Field Water Treatment Plant will soon be refurbished and upgraded to treat the additional water that is worn. These works are components of a capital investment programme, recently approved by Cabinet to be executed by WASA, to upgrade and develop its water infrastructure directed at eliminating pipe borne water rotational schedules of one in nine days in communities across Trinidad and Tobago. The impact of these developments would result in a significantly improved water supply to targeted communities, including those within the Ravine Sable Road, Longdenville.

Madam Speaker, despite the challenges confronting the water sector, the Government remains steadfast in its commitment to ensure that the population is provided with an adequate, equitable and safe supply of water.

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Seecheran: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, given that some residents of Ravine Sable Road have indicated that they have not had water in the last 23 days, when can they expect an increased supply of water being accessed from the flooded sand pit, as you said, WASA intends to access?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Public Utilities.

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, I would more than be happy to respond to the question if I am given more particulars with respect to the areas. So if the hon. Member can point to me the areas that have been without water for 23 days, I am more than willing to provide an explanation. Safe to say, that the plant did experience a disruption in the month of January, that has been rectified. And in addition to that, in the Las Lomas area, I am advised that a well that was under drilling for the last three months has gone into production last week and is providing that area with additional 400,000 gallons of water. So I expect areas in Longdenville, Cunupia, Kernahan Road, for example, will see an improvement in

their supply of water as a result of that well coming into production.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Caroni East.

Dr. Seecheran: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, can you give the commitment to this House that you would visit the residents of Ravine Sable in the short term to rectify some of the issues that they face with regard to a shortage of water?

Madam Speaker: Member, in terms of the question asked, I rule that question out of order in accordance with the Standing Orders.

PROPERTY TAX (AMDT.) BILL, 2024

Order for second reading read.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move:

That a Bill to amend the Property Tax Act, Chap. 76:04, be now read a second time.

Before this House is a Bill that is meant to address some teething issues that have arisen with the implementation of the Property Tax Act. This Bill comes very shortly after a statement I made in this House on Friday, and that statement was absolutely necessary given what was unfolding in both traditional media and social media on Thursday the 14th of March. It was necessary to clarify what has happened and to clear the air, especially with the advent of the social media where the applications such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and so on, conspiracy theories spread like wildfire and fake news is the order of the day.

1.45 p.m.

I want to state again categorically that property tax is not being suspended. The measures in the Bill are meant to improve the system of property tax for

everyone. As I indicated previously, we have reached a very significant stage in the implementation of property tax and it has been achieved through the tireless and diligent efforts of a number of public servants in the Valuation Division and in the Inland Revenue Division at the Ministry of Finance.

The issuances of Notice of Assessments under the Property Tax Act which began in February, marks a significant milestone as it represents, after 14 years of back and forth and delay, the commencement of the process for the collection of property tax in Trinidad and Tobago. As I indicated last week, prior to the—let us call it confusion that occurred, there were a total of 801 payments of property tax across the country with a total of \$1,030,864.55. That is an average of just over 1,200, 1,297, closer to 1,300.

The Members opposite have for some time now, been saying that the property tax is a bad tax. And I would like to read from the Budget Statement of the then Ministry of Finance in 2014-2016, I am reading from the Budget Statement of former Minister of Finance Larry Howai, under the UNC Government led by the hon Member for Siparia, who is now the Leader of the Opposition. And on that page—18 actually not 17, 16. Page 18 of the 2014 Budget Statement of the UNC under the heading Land and Building Tax are the following words and this is the UNC Minister of Finance speaking:

“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.”

Let me repeat that:

“Recurrent land and building taxes meet all the conditions of a good and fair tax.”

That was the UNC Minister of Finance speaking.

“The backbone of a successful land and building tax is the proper valuation to properties within a transparent framework. This will require the property rolls being brought up-to-date. I propose”—which meant the Government of the UNC proposed—“to phase in these taxes over the period of 2014 to 2017...”

Obviously, they thought they would still be there in 2017.

“During which time the properties would be valued and consultations will be held with all stakeholders. In phase 1 and effective immediately,”—making this presentation in 2013 for the 2014 budget—“we shall commence valuation of all industrial land, including plant and machinery, whether housed or unhoused with a view to implement this tax by July 1, 2014”

Let me repeat that. That the UNC Government in 2013 said that their plan was to immediately start to value industrial plant and machinery with a view to implementing the property tax on industrial plant and machinery by July 1, 2014.

“In phase 2 we will impose a tax on commercial properties and in phase 3, we will impose a tax on agricultural lands and on residential properties with a deductible allowance to provide relief to certain agricultural land owners and low-income homeowners.”

So that was the UNC policy in 2013, with implementation for July 2014.

1.50 p.m.

I looked at the video, Madam Speaker, of that budget presentation and I saw that the Member for Siparia who was Prime Minister at the time on September 09, 2013, was sitting next to the hon. Minister of Finance, Mr. Howai, and was applauding this statement made by the Minister of Finance Mr. Larry Howai. So I just thought I would put that on the record. Because therefore for the UNC to now adopt the position that this is a wicked tax is political hypocrisy at its highest.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: So let us move on. Why did the Government in 2009 and governments before that, with respect to land and building tax which is property tax, just in another name and the Government of the UNC, and why does this Government feel that the country needs property tax? You can get an answer from the recently concluded “Staff Concluding Statement of the 2024 Article IV Mission” of the IMF where they indicated that it is important that we enhance revenue mobilization through gambling taxes, the revenue authority, property taxes and so on. It is absolutely necessary that the Government starts to develop alternative revenue streams and improves revenue collection because we are still operating with a deficit budget. That is one reason.

In addition, the local government reform package makes it crystal clear and an amendment that I made to the Property Tax Act in December 2023 also facilitates the collection by the local government bodies of the tax, and retention and use for their Development Programme for goods and services and so on. It is necessary to give the corporations a dedicated revenue stream. One of the biggest complaints within the local government system is that they have no money and they have no money to purchase goods and services, materials, equipment, et cetera.

Now, property tax has been around with us for a long time. It is in fact centuries old, originating in Iraq in the year 6000 BC and in Egypt in the year 5000 BC. And in those times, the tax was based on the production value of the land, how much yield in crops and the land was expected to produce. It was therefore levied mostly on farmers in ancient times. The valuation of property has always been the basis for the imposition of any kind of land tax.

If one looks at the history in Trinidad and Tobago, as I indicated in my

statement, our Lands and Buildings Taxes Act was established in 1920 and we also had a Taxes Exemption Act in 1902. These pieces of legislation were complex and convoluted, resulted in inequity, many years of unreasonable expectations and completely different taxes on the same type of property if you were in a different location. If you are in Port of Spain, you pay a particular tax under the old lands and buildings tax or under the Municipal Corporations Act. If you are in San Fernando, a different one; in Chaguanas, a different one; in Tobago, a different one; in Point Fortin, a different type of tax; in the regional corporations, a different type of tax.

I want to re-emphasize what I said before, that the old 1920 Lands and Buildings Taxes Act governed Tobago and just some of the districts in Trinidad. It excluded cities and boroughs. As a result, assessment rules were created for the counties while under the Port of Spain Corporation Ordinance, the San Fernando Corporation Ordinance, the Arima Corporation Ordinance and the Municipal Corporations Act, there was the creation of house rate books. So that anybody who may own property in Port of Spain or San Fernando or Arima for that matter, you would, prior to 2010, in 2009, you would have received a notice of what your house rates were and those house rates were paid directly to the cities and borough corporations. But they were based on values.

So the tax that you would pay in the counties or in Tobago, the regions and the rates that you would pay in Port of Spain or San Fernando and so on, were all based on values. And whereas there were different laws, I have indicated you have Port of Spain Corporation Ordinance, San Fernando Ordinance, Arima Ordinance and so on, and the Lands and Buildings Taxes Act, a multiplicity of laws with different rates and different methods of assessment, the Valuation of Land Act which is the basis for all, which dates back to 1969, 54 years ago, governed all the

corporations. So the tax assessment was done under various ordinances or the Municipal Corporations Act or the Lands and Buildings Taxes Act but the valuation which is the basis for all of these taxes and rates was done under the Valuation of Land Act. So we had a complete hodgepodge and mix and match or mismatch of legislation and that is why it led to serious inequity where in San Fernando, for example, you had tax as high as 10 per cent.

The valuations themselves were all over the place. In Tobago and in some counties, valuations date back to 1948, 75 years ago whereas in some of the cities, Port of Spain, there were valuations in 1975, in San Fernando, valuations done in 2004 and in Point Fortin, valuations done in 2008. So those valuations in Port of Spain, San Fernando and Point Fortin which are of much more recent vintage than the older valuation in 1948, 1958, 1968 and so on, would give a much higher value for the rental value or the annual value but the tax was either the same or more as is the case in San Fernando and so on. So the amount of tax being paid in relation to various districts and Tobago was highly disproportionate to the amount of tax that was required in the cities and boroughs because of the far more recent valuations. This was far from fair, highly artificial and totally inequitable.

There were also very strange tax rates. I heard over the weekend of somebody who had a parcel of land in Tobago, a two-acre parcel and their tax was \$1.64. Now, it would cost more than \$1.64 to issue the receipt for that two-acre parcel and under the old Lands and Buildings Taxes Act, there was a flat tax rate applied to land. The rate was \$10 per acre on land in size of less than an acre to 10 acres; \$15 per acre on the next 11 acres, up to 100 acres of land, and \$20 per acre or part thereof for land over 100 acres.

There was also a flat annual tax of \$0.96 on buildings where the taxable value did not exceed \$24. And remember some of these valuations went back to

1948 so there were property owners in Trinidad and Tobago up to 2009 whose annual property tax or land and building tax, whatever you want to call it, was \$0.96 so that really made no sense and when it was over \$24, the tax rate was 7.5 per cent. Completely inequitable.

When one looks at the history of the Lands and Buildings Taxes Act, this is a 1920 Act but in the period between 1920 and 2009, 89 years, there was only one amendment to the tax rate over that 89 period which was in 1985 and that amendment was to indicate a charge of 24 cents per acre or part of an acre. So—Madam Speaker, I know this is a very interesting topic but Naparima is at it again, mumbling and grumbling.

Madam Speaker: Okay, so hon. Members, I would just ask everybody to be guided by Standing Order 53 where we speak in hushed tones, we desist from any continuous conversation. Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you, Madam Speaker. As I said, in 89 years, there was only one amendment to the Lands and Buildings Taxes Act, the rate in the Act but that was in 1985. There were no amendments to the tax rate on buildings for over 70 years. So this Lands and Buildings Taxes Act was an archaic piece of legislation.

Now, let me go into the specifics. It bears repetition. Under the Port of Spain Corporation Ordinance, the tax rate for residential buildings was 10 per cent, for commercial, it was 10 per cent, industrial, 10 per cent. Under the San Fernando Corporation Ordinance, the tax rate was 8 per cent for residential, 8 per cent for commercial, 8 per cent for industrial. And you will recall I indicated that the valuations were done in San Fernando in 2004 whereas in some of the regions, valuations had not been done since the 1950s. So when you take an 8 per cent rate in San Fernando based on a 2004 valuation and then a lower rate in one of the

counties where the value is much less because it is 50 years old, you can understand the disparity.

In Arima, the rate under the old Act was 10 per cent for residential, 10 per cent for commercial, 6 per cent for industrial. In Point Fortin, it was 2 per cent for residential, 6 per cent for industrial, 2.5 for commercial and 2 per cent in agriculture. In Chaguanas, 10 per cent for residential, 10 per cent for commercial, 10 per cent for industrial.

So the point is that if the valuations had been done in accordance with the Lands and Buildings Taxes Act which said that you have to do valuations every 15 years. So there was one done in 1948 or 1950 let us say, there should have been one done in the early 60s and then another one in the late 70s and then another one in the 1990s and then another one done say around 2010 or something like that. These things were never done. But if they were done as the law requires, the old Lands and Buildings Taxes Act which finds such favour with the Members opposite, then in Port of Spain, you would have had a rate of 10 per cent, San Fernando, 8 per cent, Arima 10 per cent, Chaguanas 10 per cent. So that if the land and building taxes were simply brought up to date in terms of values, the tax that people would have to pay would be three to four times more than is required under the Property Tax Act.

The whole point of the 2009 Property Tax Act therefore, was to eliminate all of these discrepancies, inequity, irregularities and establish a uniformed rate for taxation of various categories of land. The rate, I wish to repeat, in the Property Tax Act, is significantly less than what obtained prior to 2009—3 per cent as compared to 10 per cent—and that is something that Members opposite refuse to acknowledge.

So when you look at the facts objectively, you will see that the Property Tax

Act of 2009 was a far more equitable, fair and reasonable system than occurred previously under the Lands and Buildings Taxes Act. All that happened was that valuations were not done. As I told you, I am aware of somebody who had two acres of land paying on a 1950 valuation \$1.64 per year for their land as land tax. So that the previous manner was completely arbitrary.

2:05 p.m.

So when you look at the current Act, you reach the situation where you have people—as I said, there is a particular individual who wants to pay \$230 a year just because that is what he paid for the last 30 years. The fact that his valuation may date from 1960 is irrelevant. The fact that his valuation is completely out of date is irrelevant. He just wants to pay \$230 a year in land tax or building tax, as the case may be. He does not care what the law says, what the formula is, nor does he care that the old legislation was 50 or 60 years out of date, in terms of values.

Now, we have in our legislation, numerous avenues to address dissatisfaction by landowners or occupiers. I have checked all around the world and I am not aware that in any other jurisdiction, that you have so many stages of protest in relation to a tax on property. I think Trinidad and Tobago is unique in that respect. In our legislation—and you have to take the two Acts together, property and valuation—there is, firstly, recourse to the Commissioner of Valuations. So if you are dissatisfied with your valuation, you ask the Commissioner of Valuations to take another look at it, you challenge it. If you are then dissatisfied with what the Commissioner of Valuations does, you appeal to the valuation tribunal. If you are dissatisfied with the decision of the valuation tribunal, then you appeal to the High Court, and so on, and so on. You can then bring challenges to the Board of Inland Revenue by way of objection. If you are still dissatisfied, you go to the Tax Appeal Board, and if you are still dissatisfied

with that, you appeal to the High Court.

As I said, our jurisdiction is unique. And may I say in the first instance, it is something Members opposite need to understand, whether they know it and are pretending they do not know it, the Commissioner of Valuations under the current law, which has remained unchanged since 2009, has 12 months to decide whether the value should be changed or not. And then if the Commissioner reduces the valuation, then that is applied as a credit on future valuations going forward.

So that, in the first instance, people have the ability to go to the Commissioner of Valuations to challenge the valuation and there is quite a long time. And the reason for that is that you would want—if you are challenging a valuation, you will want to have a joint site visit between yourself and the persons from the Valuation Division, and whatever experts they may bring, and whatever you may bring, and then you would want to be able to submit evidence of what you believe the correct value is, you would want valuers to come in. So that is why there is that time in the Act. We may wish to look at that and see whether we want to shorten that 12-month period, but that is what happens in the first instance. And as I said, if you are not satisfied and you challenge it, and the Commissioner of Valuations decides to reduce your valuation, the Property Tax Act has a provision where upon receipt of a revised valuation from the Commissioner of Valuations, the Board of Inland Revenue must immediately issue a revised tax notice.

So let us say someone has a property where the annual rental value is assessed at \$120,000, \$10,000 a month, they challenge that, but the tax on that \$120,000 a month might be about \$2,500 or \$3,000 for the year. They challenge it, they go through the process, they bring their experts, the valuation people visit the property, everybody measures everything, they look at the property, the condition of the property and so on. And then the Commissioner decides to reduce the value

to, say, \$60,000, so the person would have paid \$3,000. They then get a value, which is now \$60, which is half, so they are entitled to refund or a credit of \$1,500, and that goes forward to the next year. So they would not have to pay any tax for the next year, in this particular example that I am giving, on that particular property. And as I said, this country is unique in terms of the number of avenues that people have to challenge a valuation and then the tax itself.

The Bill, I am told—I just asked for a copy of it. Right. Let me just get this clear—is certified as a money Bill. So what it means is that certification, which is subject to the:

“...opinion of the Speaker,”—who must determine whether the Bill in accordance with section 66(1)(a) of the Constitution—“contains only provisions dealing with all or any of the following matters, namely:

- (a) the imposition, repeal, remission, alteration or regulation of taxation;”

There is no question in my mind, or in any right-thinking person’s mind, that the Bill before us deals with the regulation of taxation, and therefore it is quite appropriately a money Bill. Clause 1 contains the short title, namely the citation Property Tax (Amdt.) Bill, 2024. Clause 2 introduces a new section 17A to the Property Tax Act that has the effect of extending the period of time for the Board of Inland Revenue to issue notices of assessment under the Property Tax Act from March 31, ’24 to June 30, 2024.

And the reason why we have decided to do this—there are several reasons—but there have been questions raised. And as I said, we are a responsible Government, we listened and we heard the following. There are several cases of feedback where persons—and this is mainly in the middle to upper levels—have said that they—of course, there will be outliers where there would be other groups

that will be complaining as well—have indicated that the annual rental value is simply not consistent with their own expectations, or their own experience, or what they believe is the current property rental market. So they figure it is not realistic.

Some landowners and occupiers in close proximity to each other have complained about discrepancies in the annual rental values that just do not appear logical. So someone has a house here, the person next door, the houses are similar but the valuations are quite different. So that is another complaint that we have had that has caused us to make these adjustments. Other owners and occupiers just do not understand the process for the calculation of the annual rental values. And then there were some duplicates that were issued to landowners, and that is because of differences in address, name, between the income tax or the tax records and the property records. So some duplicates were issued.

So you could have somebody who is John Smith, for example, living at 123 Eastern Main Road, and that person has a BIR number which is registered in that way, and then when they put in their forms—because there are different ways that this thing was done. You had site visits, you had persons who submitted online the particulars in the prescribed format, you had persons who printed it out and dropped it off at the revenue offices, and then there were valuations done using GIS technology, so you had different ways. So that a person may get a duplicate valuation notice if their name or address is slightly different on one of the databases to another database.

So when one looks at the Valuation of Land Act, one sees that the valuations are married to the notices of assessments under the Property Tax Act. So if there are issues concerning the valuations, these issues would naturally carry over to the calculation of the tax. The tax is just a straight calculation, 2.7 per cent of the annual rental value. It would have been quite easy for us to do nothing, not listen

to what people have to say, allow the process to continue. After all, there are, as I said, numerous stages of protest, at least six built in to the legal framework, so we could of just leave it right there, but that is not how this Government operates.

Now, the Board of Inland Revenue was on target to complete the delivery of notices of tax assessment to residential landowners and occupiers before March 31, 2024, which is the current statutory deadline. The Board of Inland Revenue was quite automated in its process and was generating as many as 15,000 notices per day. So they could have easily completed this exercise in a couple weeks. But we have been looking at the process all the time, and since Friday we have told—through the Permanent Secretary, we have asked the BIR just to hold their hand until we sort out these legislative amendments.

But I want to make the point that the job of the Board of Inland Revenue is no way as complex as the job of the Valuation Division. Inland Revenue just takes the name, address, ARV and calculates the tax, 2.7 per cent, and generates a notice, which is then delivered to the property owner. So the primary reason why the time period to issue notices of assessment is being extended is to deal with discrepancies in the valuations. And I saw an editorial in one of the newspapers—and while I do not often take editorials at face value, I saw a point being made that the issues were really with the valuations, and the tax notices are simply a sort of a robotic, automatic result of the valuations.

We have now extended the time for disputing a valuation from 30 days to 6 months, and this is from the receipt. The first valuations would have been received around November and therefore, if you take the earliest possible valuations, then that takes you to April for disputing a valuation if you got it in November. If you get it in December, May; if you got it in January, June, and so on. And one of the

features of the Bill before the House is that it gives us the opportunity to now include in the Property Tax Act a provision where the time for doing anything—delivering notices of tax assessment, imposition of penalties and so on—can now be extended in the same way that it can be done under the Valuation of Land Act.

So under the Valuation of Land Act, there is a provision where the time period to challenge a valuation can be extended by order. We are now including a similar provision in the Property Tax Act. So as we go along, if we see the need to extend the time by which taxes should be paid, to extend the time by which penalties and interest start to accrue and so on, we can extend. Because as I said, this is a work in progress. And if one goes back to the Valuation of Lands Act, because it is connected:

“(2) The valuation roll may be amended if the Commissioner considers it necessary to correct any error or omission or to record new or additional valuations or to comply with any decision taken upon an objection or appeal.”

So under the Valuation of Land Act, the Commissioner has the inherent power to adjust valuations. And as I said, under the Property Tax Act, the Act we are amending today, the Board of Inland Revenue, once they receive an amended valuation, they have to issue a new notice.

So we wish to encourage persons, if they are not happy about the valuations that they have received, to write to the Commissioner, because that is what you have to do in the first instance, and challenge the valuation, provide as much information as possible, so that the Commissioner of Valuations can look at new information relative to the property, think about what has been omitted, overlooked, underestimated, overestimated, entered incorrectly on the system and so on.

2.20 p.m.

One of the strange things, again I saw it in that particular editorial, is despite the public notices, both in terms of full-page advertisements, statements in Parliament, press releases, statements at press conferences, and so on, there is still confusion among, and I am sorry to say this, highly-educated people about the difference between a notice of valuation and a notice of tax. One person complained they got two notices of tax. I said, “Well let me see” and what it was, they showed me their valuation, their annual rental value and their tax assessment. I said that is not two notices of tax. The first one is your land valuation and the second one is your tax notice. And I am saying, we are talking about highly-educated people. As the editorial pointed out, even though I personally have gone on record on multiple occasions to say the valuation notice is not your tax notice, it still seems people think so. So it requires some public education; continued public education.

With respect to extension of the time, Madam Speaker, how much time do I have left?

Madam Speaker: Your time expires at 2:29:15.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay, so I do not have too much time. With respect to the extension of the—Madam Speaker, this is my total time?

Madam Speaker: Yes. You have 45 minutes as the mover full time.

Hon. C. Imbert: Yes, I know, I am just confirming. Thank you.

[DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Madam Speaker: So that is your contribution.

Hon. C. Imbert: Okay. I just want to confirm that on Friday 15th March, Legal Notice No. 52 of 2024 was published, extends the time period for residential landowners and occupiers to file their objections on valuations from 30 days to six

months from the time of receipt.

With respect to the other clauses in the Bill, Mr. Deputy Speaker, one of things we are doing, I have published the form that allows indigent, elderly, infirmed people, people on fixed income, pensioners, recipients of social grants, et cetera, I have published the form for them to make the application for deferral of the tax. So that is out in the public domain right now.

I would also like to point out that it is stated in the law that where there has been an overpayment of tax, or where, as a result of an amendment to the assessment roll, there has been an overpayment of tax, the Board shall within 30 days of the date of the new notice, refund the amount of such overpayment. So that is already in the law, section 20(1)(a) of the Property Tax Act. And the persons who can apply for a deferral are persons who state on the grounds of their impoverished condition, their inability to improve their financial position by reason of age, impaired health or other special circumstances that they would suffer undue hardship and they must support their application with evidence of a public assistance grant, a disability grant, senior citizen pension, a food card, and so on. So, that system is already in place and persons can now apply for deferral.

With respect to clause 2(b) of the Bill, this is the one that gives the ability to extend the time for doing various things. As I said, this is a provision that is already in the Valuation of Land Act. Clause 2(c) changes the requirement to vary the rate of tax from affirmative resolution to negative resolution. With respect to clause 2(d), it reduces the rate of tax on residential land from 3 per cent to 2 per cent. I doubt anybody on the other side would object to that; but then you never know. And then clause 3 makes it abundantly clear that from January 01, 2024, the first year that property tax would be collected, the rate for residential land would be 2 per cent.

Now, those are the simple features of this Bill. It is a very short Bill, just a few clauses. And what the clauses seek to do is to delay the date for the issuance of tax notices from 31st March to 30th June, giving the Minister power to extend the time for doing anything in the Act such as the time for the imposition of penalties and also reducing the tax rate from 3 per cent to 2 per cent.

Now, before I close, Mr. Deputy Speaker, with the three minutes left to me, I just want to point out what the property tax rates are in other parts of the world. In the United States, the tax is 2 per cent of the market value. So let us say you had a \$1 million property in Trinidad and Tobago, the tax on that would be 2 per cent of \$1 million. You can work it out for yourself, \$20,000. If you were living in the United States and you had a \$1 million property, your tax would be \$20,000 per year. In Japan, the rate is 3 per cent of the market value. It is interesting when you look around the world, they do not use rental value at all. They use the sale value of the property. And in Australia, in the UK, in India, in France, all over the world, the primary arrangement is that they take the sale value of the property, any one of you who has property in Miami or New York, and I suspect all of the Members opposite have that, just a suspicion, just a suspicion, just a suspicion.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: No, no, no.

Hon. Members; [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Withdraw what? What am I withdrawing? Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: That is totally untrue. I have no property, nothing.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members there is a clear procedure on how we will deal with any particular thing you need to object.

Hon. C. Imbert: “Yuh denying yuh have property?”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, let us—

Hon. C. Imbert: I think they protest too much, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Let us put it another way. Anyone of them, “cause ah know it have one”, that has property in the United States, you would be paying 2 per cent of the market value. So whereas in Trinidad and Tobago your tax might be \$2,000 a year, if you have the same property in the United States, it would be \$20,000 a year— \$20,000 a year. And “any one ah dem who has property in the United States, and ah know it have one ah dem”, they happily pay that \$20,000 a year in property tax. But in Trinidad and Tobago, they have a problem. This Bill before the House today is designed to assist people. It is designed to soften the impact of property tax. It is designed to give people more access to challenging their valuation and it is simply designed to help people; the Bill before the House. I thank you and I beg to move, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you have 30 minutes initial and an additional 15.

Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC (Siparia): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and thank you hon. Members of this House. Let me categorically state I own no properties outside of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: In fact, I own no properties in Trinidad and Tobago. There may be family members who do. So I want to put that on the record because this comment comes not only from the Member for Diego Martin North/East but a similar comment came from the Member for Diego Martin West, the Prime Minister of the country. So I state categorically I have no properties outside Trinidad and Tobago. I own none and I have no interest whatsoever, proprietary interest, in any such properties.

So let me see, the hon. Minister took us back on a historical journey, talking about land and building taxes from 1920 to whenever. But that 1920 law, over all these years, was repealed in 2009 and replaced by the Property Tax Act in 2009. So why this long looking back in the rearview mirror to talk about something that does not apply in the law of Trinidad and Tobago? Then the Minister says, and of course, he really has to bring the Member for Siparia in the fray, that then Minister of Finance, Larry Howai, committed to a tax saying it was property tax and that the Member for Siparia, then Prime Minister, was sitting next to Minister Howai and I was thumping my desk. Let us make it very clear, that is not what Larry Howai said.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What then Minister Howai said was that we were committed to a good and fair tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And thereafter, Minister Howai in an article in the *Trinidad Guardian* 22nd August, 2015, had this to say:

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No, no, no. Just before the election, Sir, Minister Imbert who was then Opposition Member and then Opposition Leader Dr. Keith Christopher Rowley both made that comment of words said and spoken supposedly by then Minister Howai; that he was saying he supported the property tax, that he is going to put it in 2015 after the election, residential, commercial, all the other taxes. This is what the truth is and we say great is the truth—

Mr. Lee: And it shall set you free.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and it shall prevail.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Great is the truth and it shall prevail. An article in the *Guardian* of 22nd August, 2015, Gail Alexander:

“Finance Minister Larry Howai said that Opposition PNM leader Dr. Keith Rowley is completely wrong in his claim that the People’s Partnership was implementing a property tax regime originally developed by previous Government.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The article continues:

“Howai was responding to claims Rowley made at Thursday’s PNM manifesto launch.”

Just before the election in 2015.

“But Howai in a statement issued yesterday stated: ‘It must be said clearly—the people of T&T can completely dismiss this claim as utterly false. No property tax has been implemented or is being planned for next year by the Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration.’”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Howai continues:

“I can state categorically that Cabinet has not considered this matter nor has the matter been brought to Cabinet for consideration at any time in the last two years. Any such claim is completely without basis and must be considered a total fabrication intended to create fear and anxiety.’

The Minister stated: ‘In January of this year, when the Prime Minister and Government moved to make spending adjustments in light of falling energy prices globally, a commitment was made and we intend to keep that commitment, that the most vulnerable will not bear the burden of adjustments.’

‘Following the address to the nation on 8th January, we then met with energy sector stakeholders as well as larger commercial interests in consultations on how we can reform our tax regime. During those discussions, preliminary consultations were held on a possible Industrial Land Tax for the very large companies, primarily in the energy sector.’

Howai added, ‘I would emphasize that I have consulted with the business community on the sequencing of an Industrial Land Tax, and subsequently land and building taxes on residential and commercial properties. The feedback which I have received are (i) That we should consider carefully the tax burden on individuals and businesses and the effect that it can have on new investment, and (ii) That the process of implementation will be long and drawn out and will not provide immediate cash flow benefit to the Treasury.

As a consequence the matter has not gone forward.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This is the truth. The Minister attempts to distort what transpired then but will not tell us what has happened to make them change their minds. So, for example, in the year 2009, the Minister talked about 2009, in that debate I recall my own contribution, but I remember another Member of the honourable House had also put forward one of the most passionate arguments against the destructive punitive property tax. The *Hansard* record of Friday, December 18, 2009, shows that that person would be none other than the hon. Member for Diego Martin West, Dr. Keith Rowley.

2.35 p.m.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Back then he stood up against his own PNM Government. Stood up against his own Government—

Hon. Member: That is Manning.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—and said—yes, then Prime Minister Manning, then Prime Minister Manning.

“...I know many people in this country...”

—and I quote from the Hansard:

“...for whom \$100 is much money. There are many people in this country who are struggling to make ends meet and such persons faced with an increase whether \$200, \$500 or \$600, they are living at the margin.”

Hon. Member: “Oh.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: He continued in that debate—

“...in my constituency, there is...anger...

anxiety...

and...resentment...

at both...”—ends—“...of the spectrum. If you try to defend the indefensible, you...create resentment and...

provoke people...and that is what we have at the moment.”

“...too many of our citizens are questioning the Government’s priorities and they are afraid that, as they are faced with this taxation, the moneys could be used for things they would not approve of, especially in a climate where the Government is giving the impression: “I do not really have to listen to you; while I am here, I will do as I please because sent me here.”

Mr. Tancoo: Who said that?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This was said—

Mr. Charles:—who said?

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—by then Member of Parliament for Diego Martin West. The hon. Member—[*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This is 2009, on this same property tax. He says:

“...taxation is never a light matter. It is for the Government to come clean and say exactly what we are doing.

...we cannot go forward under the guise that we fool them and the money will come in down the road when it is too late.”

Continuing:

“Trust is the only thing that the people want from the Government and the only thing to ameliorate or remove the anger, the resentment and anxiety that is associated with this tax is for the Government spokespersons to come clean and say what we are doing.”

Continuing, imagine every single word, Mr. Deputy Speaker, of the hon. Member for Diego Martin West still rings so true today. And I ask what ever happened in the last 15 years? Whatever happened, what changed someone from fighting for their poor constituents, to now saying that the property tax is his number one priority? What changed, what changed?

Mr. Charles: Delcy, Delcy.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And then that was 2009, the same Member at the launch of the 2015 PNM Manifesto property tax. On August 20, 2015, during the launch of the PNM Manifesto before that 2015 election, then Member of Parliament for Diego Martin West, Dr. Keith Rowley, stated his intention not to reinstate the property tax as had been previously discarded by the Partnership Government.

Hon. Member: “Wow.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: His intention not to raise—reinstate property tax, and he said plans were in motion for the old land and building taxes system.

Hon. Member: “Wow.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Ria Rambally then, of CNC3, asked, one of the more contentious issues in the last general election was that of the property tax:

Where in the PNM Manifesto is this addressed?

Minister—well, not Minister, then MP—Colm Imbert’s response was: it is not

in the document, and this one of the things we need to talk to people about just like the other things.

Dr. Rowley’s response:

Let me take that one. I am glad you raised that. I heard a UNC Minister, I think it was the famous Prakash Ramadhar telling people the PNM will bring

back the dreaded property tax.

Hon. Member: “Mm, Mm, Mm.”

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Telling people—this is pre, just before the election in 2015, to bring back the dreaded property tax.

Hon. Member: So said, so done.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Dr. Rowley continued:

Let me make it abundantly clear, the property tax has already been dealt with.

What the Government did years ago, they returned to land and building taxes in phases.

And that is when he spoke about Minister Howai.

So, what has changed? I ask again, what has changed from 2009, what has changed from pre-2015, that today this is the Government, as we warned, we told you so, is bringing this property tax into full implementation even though they deny that it was part of their policy and their programme. So, Minister, when you

come here to talk about the Peoples Partnership thumping desks, and myself thumping desks and so on, nothing is further from the truth. I have been consistent in the last 15 years, consistently in the fight against the property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We on this side have been consistent in the fight against this dreaded, wicked property tax.

2.40 p.m.

As I said earlier, we have been fighting the PNM on this tyrant tax for the past 15 years. And what is painful to us is that in the past 15 years, under two terms of PNM Government, the country has totally regressed. So if Dr. Rowley then, in 2009, was crying, “people cyah afford this, man, is hardship, is suffering, is poverty”, begging for poor constituents, now it is even worse. It is worse now.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Every single price has gone up in the country. Everything has gone up. You know, when I checked back in that 2009 debate—

Mr. Indarsingh: [*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—I remember—and I want to repeat it because this is very important for all of us. I said that there is a book, which I think many of us have read. It is *A House for Mr. Biswas* by the very famous and renowned author, V.S. Naipaul, and I quoted from it, and I want to quote again because we are back again onto homes and houses on this property tax:

“But bigger than them all was the house, his house.

How terrible it would have been...to be without it...to have lived without even attempting to lay claim to one’s portion of the earth; to have lived and died as one had been born, unnecessary and unaccommodated.”

This is what a person’s home represents, your house. Every person’s goal or aim is

to have a home to call their own, without fear or favour, that they can shelter their family. The right to shelter is one of the most important, basic, fundamental rights. I said it then and I repeat it today, no Government has the right to implement any measure that threatens to take away a person's right to their home, their right to shelter; no government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: It is a violation of our Constitution, it is inhumane and cruel. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I also repeat, I am of the view that this tax is not property tax. I believe it is a poverty tax that will further bring—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—citizens to pauperization. I believe this property tax is a direct attack on the people by Government. I believe it is an act of open warfare at a time when we have already been experiencing so much hardship with government-induced high prices and inflation. It is tragic now—that was 2009, you know. Fast forward to today, fast forward to '24, after 15 years, this Government, after spending half a trillion dollars of taxpayer's money, we are still living in worse—in a worse time of economic hardship and Government is once more threatening us with pauperization.

Back then, the day that they were ignoring those on fixed income, the over 110,000 senior citizens on fixed incomes, to find this money to dredge out to pay this property tax; all the people who worked in the government service, those with the minimum wage, take out of their pockets in a time of very severe financial hardship and recession. It should have been—you know, what Government should have done? The Government should have done today what they should have done years ago, which was to bring a Bill to repeal the Property Tax Act—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—repeal the Property Tax Act, repeal the Property Tax Act. That is what we should be doing today.

And so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us see what has happened since 2009, the legislative history. As I said, the parent Act was passed in 2009; the Property Tax Act in 2009; December of that year, 2009, parent law. Since then, Friday, March 15, 2024, two days ago, giving the Opposition no allowance of a working day to do proper research—Friday, we were notified that we will be summoned to this House today, over the weekend, back out on a Monday, no working day, which is normally the practice and protocol in the House, that there are at least three clear working days in the Standing Orders, that when you put a Bill for debate or a Motion, at least three clear working days—none of that was given to us, none whatsoever. Yes, sometimes we override it because they have the majority, and it is overridden when something is of utmost urgency. What is the urgency? What is the urgency, I ask, Mr. Deputy Speaker, to summon us to meet today after giving notification on Friday? Again, with not a single working day.

Mr. Charles: Wickedness.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We were hastily notified to come today to debate amendments to that Act that was passed 15 years ago in 2009. Since 2009, this Government has brought five amendments to that parent Act, the 2009 Act. Today's Bill represents the sixth set of amendments. Let us look at it: parent Act, 2009; Finance Act No. 2 of 2015, 2015; Property Tax (Amdt.) Act No. 6 of 2018; Finance Act No. 10 of 2021; Finance Act No. 21 of '22; Finance Act No. 15 of '23. Five previous amendments, and then today, after amendments in 2015, they did not get it right. After the amendments thereafter in 2018, they did not get it right. After amendments in 2021, still did not get it right. After amendments in 2022, still did not get it right. After amendments in 2023, still did not get it right.

And I predict that after the amendments today, in 2024, they still will not get it right; they will still will not get it right.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Indeed, in the haste and in the hurry, so quick to want to—really, it is like a property invasion. We talk about home invasion, it is like a property invasion, invading people’s property, their homes, to grab as much moneys as they can get in taxes, and such great was the hurry—and talked about not the normal three clear days and so on, over a weekend, what is the urgency? Tell us what is the urgency, please? Tell us what is the urgency for us to be here today and not given the three clear days to come another day in this very said week? What is so urgent? And so hurry they were, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that there is a typographical error in their clause 2(a) that does not make any sense. In their clause 2(a), they say:

“Notwithstanding the date specified in subsection (1)...”

The date will now be June 2024. But there is no 17(1), so how can you have a 17(2)? You have nothing in 17(1), but they are so busy to try to grab money out of people’s pockets—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Tancoo: “Still eh get it right”.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Still cannot get it right. They cannot get it right. What that clause 2(a)—it is a whole new brand section known as 17A.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Please, silence. Silence, Members.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So there is no section 17(1), how can you have a 17(2)?

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, again, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: There is no 17(1). So this will have to be corrected. I am sure they will bring an amendment.

Mr. Imbert: Move along.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will not be badgered and bullied by this Minister. I will not be badgered and bullied.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When you are here seeking to grab money out of people's pockets, man, we say, "No property tax in this country. No property tax in this country."

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Charles: Zacchaeus, the tax collector, was hated.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, yes, that is what is happening and—10 minutes, we move along.

Ms. Ameen: "Ah hear he sharing out house in New York".

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: There was a state of chaos that ensued because of their incompetence over the last week and even before that. So we had—first of all, clause 2A of the Bill now, which has to be amended as I have pointed out, this clause is being inserted to provide for the year 2024 only, that the BIR:

“...shall cause a notice of assessment to be issued on or before 30th June.”

So instead of a March deadline, now to be June. Why did this become necessary? It is partly due to this state of absolute chaos that ensued last week, even as Government struggled to implement its property tax. For once, can this Government stop playing their blame game and accept their own failure? Well, I guess that will never happen until maybe there are hailstones and snow in Trinidad and Tobago.

First of all, in a paltry attempt at defending the chaos and incompetence, the Minister on Friday, in this very Parliament, said, and I quote:

The implementation of the new property tax administration was—“not...a simple exercise, since we have effectively been navigating in uncharted territory.”

And:

“...there will inevitably be teething issues...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, “teething issues”? After 15 years, “teething issues”? Are you for real? This is ludicrous.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: You have teething problems; teething problems. So you now have a 15-year-old law and you are blaming teething problems. Boy, if you see a child who is 14 years old having teething problems, something is terribly wrong, you better get the doctor in the house soon. Get them there fast. Show me a 15-year-old with teething issues, and that will be an indication something is very wrong. Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member for Siparia.

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Standing Order 53. Remember, Members not speaking, please, Standing Order 53. Proceed, Member.

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed, Member.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you. Yeah, so these cannot be teething problems at this late stage in the game.

Mr. Indarsingh: Incompetence.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And then the Minister says:

We listened to the population. We are here today and we have to make—
because we listen.

Oh, what a caring Government we are, we listen.

And this is why we are here now dealing with this Bill.

He said—the Minister boasted that:

As a responsible Government, the PNM had listened to the concerns of the
population and acted.

That is totally untrue. The truth is, had they listened to the public, there would be
no property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No property tax. Last Friday, the Minister
outlined the objections to the property tax, which were made by persons in the
public domain. He said:

“1...there have been several cases of feedback indicating that the annual
rental values identified in valuation notices are not consistent with
expectations of property owners or with the current property rental market.”

It is interesting, the Minister speaking today, when he called other countries in the
world. I think he said the US, it is about market value. He called a set of other
countries in the world, it is about the sales price. Is there any other country that
deals with a ghost annual rental value that bases its valuations and assessments and
so, on annual rental value?

Mr. Tancoo: Ghost—[*Inaudible*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Yes, it is a ghost value because there is no such
thing as annual rental value that is real. And therefore, the Minister has to tell us
how that is calculated. But anyway, back to saying consistent—the:

“...notices are not consistent with the expectations of...”—people, one.

“2...residential landowners and occupiers in close proximity of each other have complained about discrepancies...

3. Other residential landowners and occupiers have complained about what they consider to be the obscure manner to which same...”—ARVs—“have been determined.”

In almost every case that the Minister cited, the objection centred, not about the rate or not just the rate, it centred on the annual rental value that was being used to assess how much taxes you must pay. Three of the five areas of objections centred around the method of calculation of the very basis for the assessment.

So if the Minister had listened, today we would not be debating this—what is contained in this Bill, we will be debating and changing the basis of the assessment. That is what the major concern has been: the basis of the assessment, away from an annual rental value, and that was the major area of concern.

And you know what the Minister’s answer was? MP Tancoo, after the Minister made his statement on Friday, asked this question:

Whether any consideration was given to changing the basis of the assessment away from the ARV, since this was a major area of concern?

What was the Minister’s answer? Completely ignored the question, saying he has now given people six month to object. No answer whatsoever.

If the concerns are all about this ARV, why is not that part of the legislative framework? If you listened—but they say, “Stick break in your ears”. You do not listen and then you want to tell the country, you listened—you listened, that is why you are here today.

Mr. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, 48(4), 48(4).

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Other areas of concern stated by the Minister:

“4. There are some duplicate valuation notices...”

And that too was totally ignored by the Minister. And five, the Minister said, this was last set of the objections came from people who felt that the:

“...property tax should have been based on the old ARVs.”

That is the annual ratable value.

Obviously, there was no annual rental value under the old lands and buildings taxes. What existed was an annual ratable value, which is totally different.

2.55 p.m.

And Minister today when he was doing history talking about the old land and building taxes did not seem to—maybe he does know but he chose to ignore that difference, big difference, whatsoever.

So there were consistent objections—will the Minister stop mumbling and grumbling. He will have his time to reply Sir, please. It is just a constant mumbling and grumbling coming from the Minister, you will have a chance to respond. Sir, can I get your protection?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members I think this will be the third time for the evening about Standing Order 53. Again, let us not let the Chair have to enforce it. Proceed. Members on the Government side, please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you very much, Deputy Speaker, thank you. So there have been consistent objections to the use of the annual rental value. The fact that the population has been consistently objecting to the use of the RV as a basis of taxation. Again, I say the problem is with the methodology, that should be currently under legislative review. And if this is the major issue of contention for those objecting that should have been addressed by the Minister. The Minister has already ignored the vast majority of objections, dismissing them, but telling the population that:

Indeed, the PNM government has taken stock of the various issues raised in the public domain regarding the evaluation of residential properties and as a responsible Government taking appropriate action to alleviate the concerns as the new system is being revised.

What is new in this system, Mr. Deputy Speaker? It is totally untrue to talk about the new system, we rolled out—this has been law from 2009.

If the Minister was indeed listening, as I said before, the Minister will have come to completely remove this wicked property tax. However, none of these concerns about the valuation have been dealt with. Instead, when we look at the Explanatory Note of the Bill, nothing in it addresses those concerns that the Minister identified, nothing whatsoever. All the clauses, not one handles the concerns that the Minister identified, those five point concerns. There is also a lack of transparency and accountability with respect to the method of valuation.

The amendments today underscore the fact that the entire property tax implementation process, in my view now officially a failed process, is tainted with complete lack of transparency and accountability.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Since last year, the country has been inundated with reports of citizens all over the country, complaining about the unfair, exorbitant valuations they have received. Many are receiving rental valuations that are grossly overstated. Others are receiving multiple notices with different valuations on the same property—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again, you just have about a minute of your initial speaking time, you have an additional 15. You care to avail yourself?

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

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Yeah, grossly overstated values, multiple notices with different values, discrepancies, valuations that make no sense to people that have terrorized people with high rates. By now we have seen so many of these accounts by citizens in the newspapers. And by the way, Mr. Deputy Speaker, where is the Minister getting the information about—what was it? Somebody two acres of land?

Ms. Ameen: In Tobago.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: They want to pay 250, where? Is it Pastor Brown sharing this information?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Where are you getting this information? The Minister should have no insight into any of the objections being lodged. That is in the purview where they are to be lodged, the authorities so to do, the Minister has no finger in that agency and should have none.

Mr. Indarsingh: None.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: But then again, what do we expect when we have people at high offices talking of being spies, and talking about Government Ministers being involved in all kinds of deals.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So there have been so many accounts of these discrepancies. And it is madness, with greatest of respect, the Minister has rushed to Parliament to correct this very serious what he calls teething problem. There is a very interesting article in yesterday's newspaper by Janelle de Souza, *Newsday*, March 17th 2024, headline:

“Home owners want clarity on erratic property tax valuation”

Property owners took serious issue with the valuation of their properties and the lack of transparency about how it was calculated. The article quotes Afra Raymond, Managing Director of Raymond and Pierre, saying and I quote:

“...there were so many discrepancies because of the ‘mass valuation’ approach, which would produce a certain percentage of ‘erratic’ valuations... six of the 10 grounds for objection listed at the back of the printed notices of valuation refer to the Valuation Roll, but it was unavailable to taxpayers or the public due to its conflict with the Data Protection Act.”

And yet the Minister comes here to boast that the amount of avenues there are for people to appeal, go to the tribunal, go everywhere, all these avenues when it is here as one. The grounds for objection listed at the back of the notices refer to the Valuation Roll, but that is unavailable to taxpayers. So how can you list this as one of these great avenues that you speak of. And whilst we talk about that and I will come back to it:

“If this fundamental defect is not rectified...the property tax could be effectively inoperable and vulnerable to judicial review as defective/unfair legislation, perhaps even to the extent of its been declared unconstitutional.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, these are the words in the article, coming out of that article that I quoted from, but I am also of the respectful view that we are treading on very dangerous constitutional grounds here and in the way this is being done the inequity in the system, the discriminate way, if you are rental property or if you are a property owner, there is discrimination that that could be open to challenge in courts once again.

Once before we had to take this Government to court, we did it, we did it when they were sending out all these notices and assessments and bullying people

and threatening people. And the court said no, no, no, no, no, the law is that it is voluntary. There is no force doing it. So once again, here we come again, grossly unfair with the “mass valuations.”

So I asked a question which I think my colleague attempted to have answered, the Member for Couva South, about the staffing at the valuations department. In an *Express* article, published March 16th, 2024, economist Dr. Vaalmikki Arjoon raised a key point. He says the Government’s move to extend the deadline to six months raises

“...the question as to whether they have adequate staffing and other resources at the Inland Revenue Division to prepare the assessment...do we have the resource ability to receive the taxes—what is the mode of payment available?”

And I believe the Member for Couva South, attempted to have this question that answered. So I am going to ask it again. Would the Inland Revenue, have the staffing and the resources to do what they are going to be mandated to do with these amendments? Minister spoke again about all these various avenues to deal with the implementation of the tax. What did he say? Avenues to help people to challenge the tax and so on. I come to the valuation’s tribunal. The issue of not having a tribunal is a very serious matter. The public can be left out in the cold. The legislation to establish a valuation tribunal was passed six years ago, Sadaam, MP Hosein, 2018. We are now in 2024. By section 15 of the Act, the establishment and composition of the valuation tribunal would have provided for and of course, it provided for up to one year for the commissioner to respond to any valuation objection and thereafter, you could go to the tribunal.

But up to today, there is no valuation tribunal. My colleague, the Member of Parliament for Baratavia/San Juan brought this to the attention of the public—

Mr. Hosein: And the President.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —at a press conference and the President. The MP wrote to the President to enquire whether it—because I think the Minister had said the tribunal was established, not believing him because I always say we do not believe anything they say. So the MP for Barataria/San Juan wrote to the President and said, have you established a tribunal? Because the tribunal is to be established by the President. The President responded and said no, no. Responded and said no.

So you are sending out assessment notices, you are telling them look, you have a chance to appeal to the commissioner and then you could appeal to tribunal, but there is absolutely no tribunal established. Will the Minister tell us when that tribunal will be established under the law—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—as mandated by law. But this Government and the law reports are replete with judgments with cases of failure to appoint tribunals and committees and so on. And, and it reminds me, you know, the Government is in breach of the Constitution once again, by its failure to lay in this House, the report of the Elections and Boundaries Commission—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: —which was due on the 14th of March in breach of the Constitution, in breach of the law.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member again, we do not need to go down that road, that is no where in the Bill we are dealing with please.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, Sir. With respect to deferrals, respect to deferrals I note now on the order people today, deferrals were like persons' vulnerable persons could apply for a deferral—they could not pay their tax, they were employed, old aged pensioners are infirm and for various other reasons they

could apply to get a deferral. But up to today, the regulations to allow people to apply for the deferral whenever published were never laid in the Parliament never became law. I only noticed I say today, finally so that is something that Minister again, 2009 legislation. Yes. No deferrals.

And this whole issue of deferrals, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it is interesting. When the Minister spoke about deferrals was very, very, you know, exuberant about hey we are going to help the poor people and the infirm and the unemployed and pensioners and so on. But this is not that you will never pay the tax, you know. This is where they are going to defer it and then when you die it becomes a death tax. It is a death tax, it is an inheritance tax, because your successor in title will become an inheritor of the tax. They will have to pay it. So it is not like they defer it and is gone—

Mr. Hinds: They inherit land.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—they inherit the land and they inherited—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—the burden of the land, which is the property tax. So let us not say that for the poor people this is gone; not saying for the pension or unemployed. It is not gone. It is there coming back to bite you when you least expect it. So—Sir, again, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this “dotish” man.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members please, please.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What is wrong with this “dotish” man?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please, we are too early in the session.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No, no, no—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, one second.

Mr. Hinds: The Speaker is on his legs.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Why are you speaking if he is on his legs?

Mr. Indarsingh: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I continue to hear the use of the term “dotish”—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Can I rise now? It seems like I have to ask. Again, Members, it is too early in the session, each Member will have an opportunity to enter the debate. The Minister of Finance would have laid his Bill, we now need to hear from the Member from Siparia and again and again, proceed.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thank you, I have five minutes left so—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—let us proceed. And now the Minister comes as well, to give himself some other powers at this. In the clause 2(c) Minister attempts to move affirmative resolution of Parliament to negative resolution of Parliament. What does it mean? If it were an affirmative resolution of Parliament, this is to change rates “eh”, this is not any simple little matter. This is to amend the schedule which sets the rates, whether the 2 per cent, 3 per cent, five whatever it may be. Now, the Minister wants to deal with it by negative resolution. What that means is it is put into place, a legal notice is published. It takes effect for 40 days unless there is a Motion to negative. With affirmative resolution—what happens? It must come for debate in the Parliament. I totally disagree with this move—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—to take away affirmative resolution. And in 2018, you know, the Minister tried to do the very said thing and was forced to back-back and back down and remove the words “negative” and insert thereof,

“affirmative”. So why we changing it now Minister, what has happened? And this is not something we come in every Friday to do, you know, and say “oh” we do not want to come back to Parliament, we do not want to come back to Parliament. No, because you are dealing with the rate. So you are giving the Minister this power to change the rate, subject only to negative resolution.

3.10 p.m.

Why does the Minister want to avoid parliamentary scrutiny? So, on the issue of refunds, some people have already paid, there is no clear word as to what will happen with these refunds, when they will be paid, and we know that people are still waiting on VAT refunds over years, and years, and years. So, if you were paid—will the Minister give some indication in his winding up, when and how the refunds will be executed.

As I close, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I repeat that we are totally against the property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Because, it is an unfair tax, it will cause more hardship on the population. We do not support, whether it is 0 per cent, 2 per cent, 3 per cent, any per cent, the whole Property Tax Act must go.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad Bissessar SC: We say no to it. I want to remind, tax revolts in countries have really made a lot of regime changes. Just remember that. History is replete with revolutions and wars that began because ordinary people refused to pay unjust, unfair taxes to tyrant leaders.

Since the beginning of civilization, tax resistance has caused the collapse of several empires, including the Egyptian, Roman, Spanish, and Aztec. Tax revolts prompted events that overturned the world order, like the 1776 American

Revolution. No taxation without representation.

Mr. Charles: French Revolution.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The 1784 French Revolution gave us liberty, equality and fraternity.

Mr. Charles: And Imbert.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And do not forget, you know, in 2009, Property Tax Act, the law passed by that Government, 2009, was one of the pieces of legislation and one of the actions of the then PNM Government, which brought down that PNM Government early in 2010.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And now we are in the holy season of Lent. Let us share this story from the holy text, the story where Zacchaeus, according to the holy text in Luke—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you just have about two minutes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: One?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: About two minutes.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Well, that is fine, for my quotation, Sir. I thank you for the guidance.

Mr. Charles: The tax collector.

Mrs. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This tax collector was short, very rich, very corrupt, chief tax collector in Jericho, in the time of the Lord Jesus Christ.

“...like other tax collectors working for the Roman Empire”—he—“was seen

as a sinful figure of ill-repute: self-enriching, corrupt and traitorous to...”—his people.

“When Jesus passed through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem...”

—he climbed up on a sycamore tree to see him, because he was too short.

“To everyone’s surprise, Jesus went to the tree and told...”

—him, he said:

“...come down...”—from there, come down—“...that he would be a guest...”—invited him to—“...be a guest that day.”

And after this encounter with the saviour, he said:

“Look, Lord, here...now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.”

In this holy time of Easter, Mr. Deputy Speaker, this story symbolizes Jesus’s open arms to all, and therefore, I call upon this Government to do, like he did, to repeal and remove this wicked property tax, once and for all.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Repeal your tyrant property tax and call elections now, and take yourselves out of government. I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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, I have to say listening to the Leader of the Opposition, I cannot describe it as only painful. I have to describe it, and I mean this with the greatest of respect to a Member for Siparia, as desperate.

Mr. Hinds: Yeah.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And permit me to say why I have used such a term to the contribution, to ascribe the contribution of the hon. Member.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me start with the most glaring act of desperation. That is the Leader of the Opposition saying in her opening words, there was an attempt to ascribe a different purpose to then Minister of Finance in 2014 Larry Howai. The hon. Member read a press release produced by then Minister of Finance, Larry Howai, which tried to run away from the *Hansard* record—but the hon. Member for Siparia, Mr. Deputy Speaker, went through a legislative history, which I will come through in a moment, starting in 2009, but ended up by saying at 2:43 and 32 seconds p.m., “we will repeal property tax”. The hon. Member read from a prepared script, and perhaps I ascribe this now to those who wrote the speech for the hon. Member.

Mr. Hinds: She is not pronouncing— [*Inaudible*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: But the hon. Member started off by saying that the PNM’s legislative history was that there were five amendments to the Property Tax Act.

3.15 p.m.

Diligently, they recorded five amendments to the Property Tax Act. The first one was No. 2 of 2015. I then wrote in my notes “chuckle”, because the Member chuckled.

Mr. Hinds: No, she did not chuckle.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Act No. 6 of 2018 was then recounted; Act No. 10 of 2021; Act No. 21 of 2022; Act No. 15 of 2023. But you know what shocked me and why I ascribed the term “desperate” to the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Member for Siparia? Act No. 2 of 2015 was the Finance Bill, 2015. It was assented to and gazetted as Act No. 2 of 2015. It was assented to on the 28th of January, 2015.

Hon. Member: No, no.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: That Finance Act No. 2 of 2015, amended the Property Tax Act, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and listen to where it was amended. If you go to page

79 of Act No. 2, the Finance Act of 2015, under the Leader of the Opposition, then sitting as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, here is what Part XXII at page 79 of that Act says:

“The Property Tax Act, 2009 is amended...”

Let me repeat that word, “amended”, not repealed, not replaced, not struck out, but it is:

“...amended by inserting after section 52, the following new section:

52A. Notwithstanding any written law to the contrary, the payment of any tax under this Act shall be waived for the period 1st January, 2010 to 31st December, 2015.”

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, not that the law will be repealed, the hon. Member said, in expressing an amazing form of odium for this law; not only did the hon. Member say, we will repeal the Act; not only did the Member end by quoting that history is replete with revolution and war, 1776, no tax without representation, the French Revolution, the hon. Member went on to say that under her leadership, the Member for Siparia, that the dreaded Property Tax Act was condemned, and stood here today to say that the hon. Member has been condemning this tax for 15 years.

Well, let me start with this, May 2020, May 2015—sorry, May 2010, the hon. Member came in as Prime Minister, 24 May 2010; 2011 came, 2012 came, 2013 came, 2014 came, 2015 came, the hon. Member had her Minister of Finance in a budget presentation, put on the record by way of reminder today by the Minister of Finance, say that the property tax will be implemented.

Hon. Member: 2014.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And that was in 2014, but in 2015, the hon. Member only takes the step to waive to December 2015. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the *Hansard* is there for everybody to read and therefore, the hon. Member’s statement that the Member for

Siparia has been pioneering against property tax for 15 years, will repeal property tax, as she says—the hon. Member says she will, is something of a desperation, Mr. Deputy Speaker; a desperation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let us get to another act of desperation. The hon. Member in the speech prepared read and asked certain questions. The hon. Member reflected upon the words of then Member of the Opposition, the Member for Diego Martin West. The hon. Member said in the quotations and then asked a question, “What has changed since 2009?” That is what the hon. Member said. The hon. Member said, “What has changed since 2009, when the Member for Diego Martin West stood in the Parliament and said that he was objecting to property tax in that form then?” But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, perhaps the hon. Member for Siparia is a little tired—we all get tired from time to time—perhaps the hon. Member was asleep for the last nine years. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, perhaps that is the reason why the Member for Mayaro wishes to challenge the hon. Member now for leadership to bring vibrancy in. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

[Member for Mayaro raises hand]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members—again, each Member will have the opportunity, right? Member for Mayaro, you want to just clarify?

Mr. Paray: Imputing improper motives against the Member for Mayaro, 48(6).

Hon. Members: What?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I would want to ask you for more clarity, but I would not go down that road.

Hon. Members: *[Laughter]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Overruled. Overruled.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: “Yuh cyah want to run fuh leadership and fraid tuh say so”, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Hinds: “He fraid, he fraid, he fraid, he fraid, he fraid”.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: The hon. Members across there are smiling broadly, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Anyway, Mr. Deputy Speaker, here is where we go. For those of us who have the courage to reflect upon the truth, Mr. Deputy Speaker, here is where we go. The hon. Member for Siparia said, put on the record today that the Member for Diego Martin West had spoken in 2009 in this Parliament and had made reflections on property tax, and that the hon. Member did not support property tax in 2009, according to Member for Siparia. The hon. Member asked, “What has changed since 2009?” and I am putting on the record that perhaps the hon. Member has forgotten, fallen asleep, is just too tired to recall but the fact is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Government and the then Opposition, under the Member for Diego Martin West in period 2010 to 2015, the hon. Member for Diego Martin West led a campaign in this country of local government reform. And in that local government reform, which was articulated in clear terms in 2014; into the manifesto of the PNM in 2015; in 2016, in the local government election; in the period of joint select committee work where the local government reform was being undertaken; in 2019; in the manifesto of 2020; and in Act of Parliament, 2022, which is the miscellaneous provisions Act which amended the local government package, the Member for Diego Martin West, as Prime Minister of this country, clearly receipted property tax to be found in the 2022 law, in section 10 of the local government, miscellaneous provisions Act. What does section 10 of that law say? That property tax will go to local government.

And therefore, Mr. Deputy Speaker, perhaps the Member for Siparia cannot remember, perhaps the speech writers just did not just bother to reflect on anything, but the hon. Member for Siparia clean jumped over joint select

committee, hundreds of interactions with the public, thousands of submissions coming from the public, the fact that a report came to this Parliament, that the amendments were made to the law, but the position of this Government was made absolutely clear by the Member for Diego Martin West that we are supporting property tax to go into the coffers of local government and we have done so by way of law, Mr. Deputy Speaker; law which went in the Joint Select Committee and then in its report, law which was operationalized partially in 2022—in November 2022.

But very importantly, it is the Minister of Finance himself who, in the Finance Act of 2023, Mr. Deputy Speaker, put onto the record by Act No. 15 of 2023, the fact that property tax—by way of amendments to sections 33 and 34 of the Property Tax Act, so that timing could be done, et cetera—that property tax will, by Order of the Minister of Finance, go directly into the statutory fund, the corporation account for the 14 municipal corporations. And why was that done, Mr. Deputy Speaker? It was done specifically to improve what we, as a country, asked local government to do. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is that? In our comparison of what is the money being used for—because today we are talking about property tax. The Member of Siparia cannot recall the entire event of property tax in the context of local government, so let me explain what that is about.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Development Programme, which is the money that we use to develop this country in local government, in 2021, the total Development Programme was \$216-odd million. In 2023, the revised expenditure—the revised Development Programme was \$427 million for the 14 corporations. And, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if you look at the Development Programme, you will note that the city of Port of Spain, by way of example, had a development programme of \$32

million; others, in similar form. If you look to that in Princes Town, for example, it was \$23 million; if you look to Mayaro, it was \$21 million; and if you look to San Juan/Laventille, \$31 million. You look at Port of Spain at \$32 million, it is that Development Programme, added on and supplemented by the PSIP, which—in its other form, which is IDF, that is, if you look to the development fund programme for the year 2023, we were looking at a total amount of \$37.5 million in 2022, we were looking at the IDF in 2023 at \$71 million. So you have \$429 million plus \$71 million but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that represents only a fraction of the money required to run local government.

To all of the citizens of this country, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the entire amount of money for bridges allocated to the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government alone, not the corporations, is \$3 million. If you look to the corporations themselves, you will see another couple million dollars. When you look to an allocation of the PSIP to the Port of Spain City Corporation at \$32 million, what they actually asked for, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is closer to \$100 million. And in answering the Member for Siparia's question as to what happened between the 2009 contribution by the Member for Diego Martin West and the property tax, as we have brought it alive, the answer, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is the allocations are intended to go directly, in terms of residential property taxes, to the municipal corporations so that we can do more work for people, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Last year, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that money resulted in nearly 7,000 jobs being created in local government. Mr. Deputy Speaker, we received umpteen letters from Members opposite, from Members on this side, from members of the public asking for works to be done, and the funding of that work is what we are saying, comes from the property tax. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the Member for

Siparia cannot remember all of local government reform, well then, the hon. Member is clearly on her own. But if you look to the newspapers this week, you will see that the chairman of one of her corporations was complaining bitterly that tax was dropping from 3 per cent to 2 per cent, and complaining that that would represent a shortfall in revenue to the corporation.

3.30 p.m.

So it is clear it is not only the Member for Mayaro that has a problem with Siparia, but clearly the members of corporations have problems with the Member for Siparia.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Because if members of the UNC corporations are asking for the property tax to stay at 3 per cent because they want the revenue, they want to spend on projects, they understand how to do it, well then where is the UNC? You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as difficult as the decision was to proclaim the public procurement law because it is a new law, it is a complex law in this operation, it gave the corporations, subject only to conformation of funds by the Ministry of Finance, the ability to procure themselves. So how could one realistically say, give me more, perform more, fix roads, fix drains, clear watercourses, give me a better quality of life, but do it with less money. How does one say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as the hon. Member for Siparia does today, that the hon. Member is going repeal property tax. What this population is left with is, that vacuum of, what are you going to replace it with. The hon. Member did not say in 2010, '11, '12, '13, '14, or '15 what the hon. Member was going to replace it with in terms of policy. The hon. Member did not say that the Member for Couva North was going to put part of his transportation moneys that he does—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again—

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—in moving people around—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, address the Chair.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—for pleasure.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Address the Chair. Address the Chair.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, please. Members—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members—

Mr. Ratiram: Totally irrelevant. We will use the rental—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, both.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Members, Members, please. Please. Please. All right. So, again, at this time only the Member for San Fernando West is recognized. Other than that there are clear procedures of how we operate in this Chamber, other than that, it will not be tolerated. Proceed.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, perhaps if the language in this Parliament was Spanish, other people may understand better.

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

Hon. Members: Yeah. Yeah.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: But I am fairly good at Spanish. I could assess if the hon. Member needs translation, but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is nobody on this side with allegations of human trafficking named by their colleagues. There is nobody.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Outside it may be different.

Mr. Hinds: Human trafficking!

Dr. Moonilal: Yes, but—Standing Order 53(1)(e) first, that is for now, but before that Standing Order 48(6). I got up on 48(6) but then 53(1)(e), Laventille West intervened, so it is really both I am on. You can decide which one.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, proceed, Member. Not at this time, Member.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Feeble attempts, Mr. Deputy Speaker, feeble attempts to hoodwink the public.

Mr. Hinds: Who the cap fits!

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: You know that famous song by Bob Marley “Who the cap fits”?

Mr. Hinds: Yeah.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Mr. Deputy Speaker, sip your tea cool my dear brother from Couva North. Mr. Deputy Speaker, so I was saying—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: San Fernando West, you are a seasoned campaigner, address the Chair, please. Address the Chair.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Yes, Mr. Deputy Speaker. “Who the cap fits let him wear it”, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I was on about the Member for Siparia’s desperation in attempts. I characterize not the hon. Member but the argument. And I am saying, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the problem in the argument coming from the Members opposite, led by the Member for Siparia is that they have not articulated where extra revenue for essential works in local government, in the form that we suggest, property tax, should be applied for residential properties, where that revenue should come from.

You see, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I recall vividly the hon. Members opposite when I was in Opposition in 2010 to 2015 saying that they would bring back the land and building taxes. Now you would know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the

Property Tax Act repealed Part V of the Municipal Corporations Act. It also repealed the land and building taxes, and I, as Member of Parliament for San Fernando West, am gloriously happy that happened because in San Fernando if we went with the land and building taxes which I heard the Leader of the Opposition when as Prime Minister in charge of this country through her membership described, they would bring back land and building taxes, land and building taxes would devastate the people of San Fernando West. So in property taxes we are looking at 2.7 per cent by the time you do the deductions of the annual rental value.

In the land and building taxes, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in San Fernando City Corporation in San Fernando West, if the Member for Siparia was put back in charge with land and building taxes we would be paying 8 per cent of the capital value of the property. So if you have a million-dollar property in San Fernando, if you have a pink palace worth \$25—\$30 million as a residence, right, if you had a home like that and the Valuations Division comes in and they assess the capital value of \$35 million for your palace, the value of your property tax would be 8 per cent of that per annum. Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is horrifying to me is that the Members opposite—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: The Members opposite just say anything, Mr. Deputy Speaker. So they say, property tax is bad. They say, bring back land and building taxes. They say, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the hon. Member for Diego Martin West cannot explain a position when the fact is, it is explained. We have taken property tax, we have located it into local government reform. We have said today in the Parliament, the Minister of Finance has said in monitoring and implementing the local structures, the Board of Inland Revenue, the assessment through the

Commissioner of Valuations, the hon. Member in the measures put forward in this Bill today is recognizing a few very certain and hard truths, number one, one.

The Minister of Finance is the Minister of Finance. The Minister is not the Commissioner of Valuations. The Commissioner of Valuations is a public officer with public responsibility. The Minister of Finance can, at best, give policy directions. The Minister of Finance cannot tell the Commissioner of Valuations to come up with a value. In fact, that is excluded in law. The Minister of Finance has said, listen, as a responsible Minister of Finance, the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East is paying attention, there are discrepancies that the Minister has reported to the Cabinet and the Minister has brought a note to the Cabinet saying, listen, the Ministry of Finance recommends we need to modify the property tax. The only thing that the Minister has power to do in law is to adjust the rate. The only thing that the Minister has power in law to do is to adjust the percentage for residential tax at this point. We accept because the Minister of Finance has said that there is an issue with the valuations being inconsistent. The Government complains itself by standing up in Parliament today, we have a problem with the valuations. We, the Government have a problem with the valuations. You can quote me on that. That is why we are here to amend the law.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Member for Diego Martin West is not the Commissioner of Valuations, and they would be the first people if he gave a direction to the Commissioner of Valuations to move to court for constitutional challenge to injunct the hon. Member to ask for a judicial review because the hon. Minister cannot act ultra vires the law, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The hon. Minister has done what he can to come to the Parliament and say, listen, hon. Members, we propose a reduction from 3 per cent to 2 per cent. The hon. Member

says, move from 3 per cent to 2 per cent recognizing that the problem is the valuation. The hon. Minister of Finance has said and the Cabinet has accepted and the law is now before us as a Bill, have the objections happen over a six-month period, not 30 days.

Mr. Hinds: That is Botox.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: That six-month objection period will allow the country to get to the root cause of the valuation. Mr. Deputy Speaker, it might very well be that people in this Parliament themselves might object to valuations coming because that is your right to object. But to hear the Member for Siparia here today say that the law is unconstitutional, that the hon. Members effectively served notice to the hon. Member was going to challenge the law, bring judicial review, bring constitutional relief for what? I refer the hon. Member to Trinidad court cases, to the All Trinidad Cane Farmers position where the law in relation to taxation was settled. Mr. Deputy Speaker, if the hon. Member did not repeal property tax in 2010, '11, '12, '13, '14, '15, how is the hon. Member—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—coming to strike out the law, having only deferred the tax in January 2015 under Larry Howai to December 2015. How? How is the hon. Member going to face this country or the court seriously, Mr. Deputy Speaker. How? The fact is, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that the Minister of Finance can only adjust the rate right now. He has given by way of recommendation in the clauses of this Bill where we say that we are going to six months, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in clause 2B of the position where we say—sorry, 2A:

“Notwithstanding the date specified in subsection (1)...”

Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me stop there. It is trite that an amendment to include the word “seventeen”—we say “word” instead of “number”, 17, in 17A is

going to happen. We discussed that, the hon. Minister of Finance and I as I walked into the Chamber the hon. Member says, yes, it was a typographical error, it will come in committee stage, Mr. Deputy Speaker. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, if that is your big yellow flag to wave, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you are on real thin ice.

Mr. Deyalsingh: Desperate.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, apart from being characteristic of desperation arguments such as that, the fact is, the six-month valuation challenge is what this Bill is about. The Minister of Finance is allowing for the Government itself by way of policy statements to ask the Commissioner of Valuations to go back to the root cause, which is the valuation. What could be more reasonable than that than, Mr. Deputy Speaker? But here is what the Minister of Finance does further, and perhaps this escapes the Member for Siparia. In clause 2B the hon. Minister proposes that we have a repeal and replacement of section 52, and hear is what section 52 says:

“52(1) If any act, or anything required to be done at or within a fixed time under this Act cannot or is not so done, the Minister may by Order, from time to time appoint a later time for doing the same, whether the time or any later time appointed within which the act ought to have been done has or has not elapsed or expired.

Now let me explain that, Mr. Deputy Speaker. This is critically important as it relates to section 21 of the Property Tax Act. Section 21 comes under Part IV under the heading “Objections, Relief, Revaluations and Appeals”, and hear is what 21 says, and I want this on the record, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

“The owner of land...”

Stick a pin, that includes occupier—

“...who is dissatisfied with the assessment of the Board...”—that is the

Board of Inland Revenue—“may, within twenty-one days...”—of receipt of the notice under section 17—“...notify the Board in writing of his objection...”

Let me connect the dots. Clause 2B by repealing and replacing section 52 of the Act allows for the challenge timeframe of 21 days to be adjusted by the Minister of Finance. That is an important relief for the people of Trinidad and Tobago so that their objections can happen. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, allow me to also clarify another a very important point.

Under section 20 of the Property Tax Act it is a fact that some notices have gone out for assessment. The Board has sent out notices. The hon. Minister has reported today that \$1 million was received in property taxes. The hon. Member has also therefore, to be assisted by the submission now put on the record, those notices will have to be redone so those persons who paid at 3 per cent already and are to be assessed at 2 per cent:

No. 1, expect a new notice.

No. 2, it will be pegged at 2 per cent and not 3.

No. 3, the valuation objection process is now enlarged to six months.

No. 4, the Minister has published in the Parliament today on the Order Paper the forms by which you can object and ask for relief—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—if you are in difficult circumstances:

No 5, persons who have paid will receive a refund.

No. 6, Mr. Deputy Speaker, it means that there is a proper opportunity to have the root cause of this problem, which is the valuation, the annual rental value adjusted by way of objections, by way of policy prescriptions.

3.45 p.m.

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: But for the record, Madam Speaker, as I welcome you back to the Chair, the Minister of Finance cannot act ultra vires and give a valuation himself. The Minister of Finance has to rely on the Commissioner of Valuations, which is an office that is an independent office by public servants, appointed by the Public Service Commission, which is protected in the Constitution within the meaning of so many of our laws, be it Hinds, et cetera, or Endell Thomas, or any one of them applied across the board in different circumstances, but the point is the Minister must act within the law.

Madam Speaker, it is important, therefore, to reject the arguments of the UNC. The argument that property tax is unjust, unfair, is an argument that comes in 2024 when the hon. Member for Siparia was the Prime Minister for five years and three months and relied and enacted and applied the property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: The hon. Member has taken no steps to challenge the constitutionality of the property tax law. In fact, the only challenge made was in CV2017 01839 between *Devant Maharaj v The Commissioner of Valuations and The Attorney General*. The Court of Appeal dealt with that matter. The hon. Leader of the Opposition has claimed maternity of that lawsuit, the appearances were by Mr. Anand Ramlogan SC and Ms. Jayanti Lutchmedial for the appellant. The appellant himself, Mr. Devant Maharaj has said, not me, never again, never UNC, I am not going back there because they cannot be trusted. And the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East has come to this Parliament today, assured that there has never been a challenge on the constitutionality of the Property Tax law.

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The legitimate purpose for the property tax is to be found in the 2022 Municipal Corporations miscellaneous provisions amendment, by section 10 of that Act, where property tax is applied and given to the regional corporations. It is to be found in the 2023 December law, which is No. 5 of 2023, that is the Finance Act of December, whereas an interim to the proclamation of section 10 of the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Act, that new section 33 and 34 of the Property Tax Act was put in, where the Minister of Finance can by Order give the property tax directly to the corporations. The legitimate aim is carried further, because as I have described in the development financing, the DP side, the PSIP of the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government, as well as the IDF, that we are one-tenth of the moneys that we would like to have as a country.

If you look at the request of each corporation. Princes Town will ask for \$90 million and get \$13 million in certain projects; the chairman of the UNC corporation, Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo has said “I want meh 3 per cent, I doh want 2 per cent”. That chairman of a UNC has a political leader today saying scrap it entirely. So there is open internecine warfare in the UNC. The regional corporation wants the money, the political leader “doh” know, Mayaro is confused, somebody else coming down the long—we “doh” know what is happening in the UNC. No kind of understanding. Naparima has declared that he is gone. We knew that long time ago. Mentally and otherwise he is tired.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is chaos opposite. The Leader of the Opposition has said that the UNC, as a Government, proposes to repeal property tax, but they have not said what they are going to replace it with.

So, they want the money, they want the road fixed, they want services done,

they “ain’t” know how to get the money. They came here on Friday and they opposed raising the debt ceiling limit knowing that the country requires money to perform from its focused Development Programme, knowing that COVID came, knowing that the price of oil is in a debatable position because of geopolitical positions, but they are just desperate, and therefore they say and do anything, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—which we must be careful to observe, Madam Speaker. I as Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, I am on an aggressive programme to deliver local economic development. Picture this, Madam Speaker. Picture in every HDC community, much like what we saw on the weekend, we saw a terrible consequence in the Harpe Place. No gated community there. Why should the Harpe Place not have its own gated community? Why? Why should the Harpe Place not have its own security post? Its own hairdressing salon? Its own grocery?

Madam Speaker, because the development money for these projects needs to be funnelled, local government will be building those out. That is what we want the modest property tax for. Local government wants to use every empty lot of land in this country to put under hydroponic agriculture. Local government wants to collect all of the grass cut by 22,000 people every day. Forestry, 9,000 CEPEP workers, 9,000 daily paid workers. That grass is going to waste, we want it to create top soil. We want hydroponics, we want every empty lot of land. Madam Speaker, we have done a project, we have done proof of concept, we took local economic development which is what we want the property tax for. We established 43 vertical hydroponic units, we paid \$150,000 complete package, the 43 units, tanks, chemicals, solar lighting, netting, and our proof of concept

demonstrates that with that expenditure you will earn \$30,000 a month in your pocket.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: We are ready to launch that to this population. We have to pay for the units. We want the property tax for local economic development. We want the debt ceiling raised so that RDC can have some more money to do these developments. We want Harpe Place to have a gated community, we want to put municipal police on the ground, but the UNC comes and says no to everything. No to development. Live in a pink palace and no to the people. You see they could throw barbs across the floor about “who have and doh have” all day long. The fact is nobody opposite me is indigent.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: Some have houses in Spanish, some have houses in English, “some running bus, some running fair, some running all kind ah thing”, but nobody opposite is indigent. Why should the people of our HDC communities, empty lots, why should the man on the ground, seven men on the ground in a seven-a-side not get the opportunity to earn \$30,000 a month? Why? Where are they getting the money from? Where are they getting the money from? This is what local government reform is about. This is what we are prepared to launch. This is why we want the property tax. This is why the Minister of Finance has come to say, let it be modest and moderate. You think the Minister of Finance came to the Cabinet and did not say he himself had a problem with the valuations. That is how we are here today.

The hon. Prime Minister is the Head of the Cabinet. The Cabinet approved the proposed amendments, but what the Minister of Finance cannot do, is to go and tell the Commissioner of Valuations, write down X and call that a value. The

Minister of Finance cannot do that, Madam Speaker. This law is very proportionate. The money intended to come out of the law is exactly what we need. As I mention the word “proportionate” I heard some chuckles from my friends opposite, which I always admire.

Mr. Hosein: Suratt v Suraj.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: I remember them well, when every Monday, Sunday, Friday, if you recall we used to sit in the Parliament almost four days a week. Every single time I saw the Members opposite—to abolish child marriage, to do income tax reform, to do amendments to the criminal justice system. They opposed everything, and when the law that this Bill—

Mr. Hosein: Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(1), relevance, please.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: I am on the Bill.

Madam Speaker: Yes. So Member for San Fernando West, I know you are on the Bill but it is beginning to spread so I will ask you to just bring it back in. Thank you very much.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: So on this Bill and on its proportionality, which I was discussing, and on the Leader of the Opposition’s direct statement that the hon. Leader intends to challenge the law, I am now underwriting the law so that when we get to the Privy Council on it, and win, that we can demonstrate the proportionality.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And I am anchoring the proportionality in this debate by saying that the hon. Members mocked and jeered until the Privy Council put down a good beating on them in the case of Dominic Suraj, and that case upheld the case of

Suratt, which said that you can pass simple majority law in the context of Trinidad and Tobago's Constitution—

Mr. Hinds: That is correct.

Hon. F. Al-Rawi:—even though a three-fifths formulated approach may be prescribed by the Constitution, the Privy Council clearly recognized that we have a scourge called the UNC.

Hon. Member: “Aaah.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. F. Al-Rawi: And that we cannot take formulistic approaches and not pass law that can survive proportionality scrutiny, Madam Speaker. So all I can say as I come to a close, Madam Speaker, is that the entire legislative agenda, led by this Government in the period 2015 to today's date, which comprises over 600 laws and radical reforms, has been upheld by the Privy Council, and I take great pride in knowing that that is the outcome of our highest court of appeal, in saying that we were correct all along.

So, Madam Speaker, I reject the desperation in the argument coming from the Member for Siparia. I ask you to ignore, most respectfully, those exhortations which were improperly identified and put on the record. I believe that I have answered each one of the points, and I thank you for this opportunity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Dr. Moonilal: Return sanity.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, my friend from San Fernando West is very fortunate that I stand in this House in the Holy month of Ramadan—

Hon. Members: “Aah. Oh, yes.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—and I may be prohibited to utter certain words that I cannot use in this House in this holy period, Madam Speaker.

Dr. Moonilal: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Hosein: But, Madam Speaker, the Member for San Fernando West spoke a lot about desperate arguments in this House, but, Madam Speaker, I saw a man suffering from “tabanca”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: You could say that.

Mr. S. Hosein: Heavy, heavy “tabanca”, Madam Speaker. At one point in time I heard, rightly so, that he is underwriting the law. Madam Speaker, respectfully, that is no longer the job of the Member for San Fernando West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: There is a new man in charge, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And, Madam Speaker, a fired man should not be giving advice of who want to come for who “wuk” in this side. Study your side, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And I have to now correct some of the matters on which the Member for San Fernando West would have misguided this particular record, and it is my duty to now bring some level of—

Dr. Moonilal: Sanity.

Mr. S. Hosein:—sanity, reasonableness and truth to this particular debate. And, Madam Speaker, during the period 2010 to 2015 the People’s Partnership Government, led by the Member for Siparia, did not introduce a single new tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Not a single new tax. In fact, in some instances taxes were in fact reduced.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And that government, Madam Speaker, was able to build hospitals, schools, police stations, roads, bridges, and people had basic necessity of water in this country, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Water! And this Government is now coming to squeeze the taxpayers of whatever little money they have after an unprecedented pandemic causing many to lose income, many to lose their homes, many to lose their jobs, and wants to ask them for whatever little they have now, to give to them, for waste, squandermania, and I do not want to say the “C” word.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: Oh, no, no.

Mr. S. Hosein: And, Madam Speaker, I have to remind them, because this Government—

Dr. Moonilal: Tell them the “C” word.

Mr. S. Hosein: The “C” word is—

Mr. Tancoo: Corruption.

Mr. S. Hosein: Yes. And, Madam Speaker, they would have spent half a billion—

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, I just ask you to withdraw. Your colleague knew better.

Mr. Tancoo: Withdrawn, Madam Speaker.

Mr. S. Hosein: And, Madam Speaker, this is the same Government that presided

over a \$500 million loss in the Atlantic Train 1 scandal.

Dr. Moonilal: Yes.

Mr. S. Hosein: Soca on the Seas, a Prime Minister residence that cost \$45 million, and you have swimming pools in this country that are costing the taxpayers \$6 million, and not a single person could swim in that pool.

4.00 p.m.

Madam Speaker, this is the track record of this PNM Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: They have no moral authority to come to this population to ask for their money for them to continue their waste and squandermania.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And the Member for San Fernando West would have raised issues of property tax in the context of local government reform. And I have to put this in context, Madam Speaker. The Member for San Fernando West seems to suggest that property tax will go into local government. Madam Speaker, that is not entirely truthful because there are several categories of land under this particular regime. You have residential lands, you have agricultural lands, you have commercial lands and you have industrial lands. Only residential properties are going into local government. So they want us to believe that the Government is going to give all of this property tax to local government, and that simply is not the case. It is not the case.

Madam Speaker, then the Member made it seem as though, with property tax collection, it means that the corporations are going to get more money. Well, that is not true because the law says otherwise. When we look at the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Act, at page 50 where there was an amendment to section 115—and I want to read this into the record. It says

this:

“Where estimates have been approved for use of a Corporation for a particular year and the Corporation is in receipt of sums collected from Property Taxes for use by the Corporation, such sums will be off-set from releases due to the Corporation for that year.”

So what does that mean, Madam Speaker? That means that if a corporation was getting \$10 million from the Government, central government, but they collect \$2 million in property tax, it would now mean the Government will give them \$8 million and they retain \$2 million in property tax. It is not that they are going to get an additional \$2 million. The law says it is an off-set.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: So, Madam Speaker, that is propaganda on which—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Would the Member give way?

Mr. S. Hosein: I am not giving way. You spent your time speaking about pink palaces, I am spending my time speaking about the law, Madam Speaker.

Dr. Moonilal: Yes, yes, yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, and that is simply what the facts are.

Mr. Al-Rawi: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Hosein: The law says it.

Mr. Al-Rawi: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. S. Hosein: This was a law brought by the Member for San Fernando West that says that property—

Madam Speaker: Member for—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Might I apologize—[*Inaudible*]

Madam Speaker: Thank you very much. Thank you—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: All right. So the Member has now given us the assurance he will curb his ways, so I will ask on the other side that we do not reciprocate what we know we should not do. Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. S. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, that was a law brought by the Member for San Fernando West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: Correct, correct.

Mr. S. Hosein: That was a law that was brought by him. So, Madam Speaker, then he asked, he said, “Why can a man not get \$30,000 a month in salary?” The answer is, Madam Speaker, because another man wants \$80,000 per month in salary.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: That is the simple answer to that, you know, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, I want to also respond to some of the points made by the Minister of Finance in his—

Dr. Moonilal: A bully.

Mr. S. Hosein:—in his piloting of the Bill that is before us, this very short Bill that is before us that deals with another amendment to the Property Tax Act, 2024—the Bill is 2024. And in this particular provision, the Member is speaking about history, and history in terms that the UNC wanted to re-implement or start the collection of taxes through the land and building tax regime. They are two separate regimes and that is featured in this debate. And the Member for San Fernando West followed on from the Minister of Finance and cried and said, “You all did not repeal it.” But, Madam Speaker, let me put some more facts onto the record. The People’s Partnership Government would have laid a Bill in this

Parliament called the Land and Building Tax Bill, 2011. And at clause 45 of that Bill, I am reading, and it quotes:

“The Property Tax Act, 2009 is repealed.”

That was the policy of that Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: That Government did not collect property tax. Property tax was suspended from the period 2009 to present, when this very wicked Government now decides to tax the population out of the little moneys that they have, Madam Speaker.

Dr. Moonilal: Shame.

Mr. S. Hosein: And that is the point I wish to raise with respect to that particular issue.

And, Madam Speaker, there are other points that I want to now go on to with respect to specific provisions in this Bill, and one deals, in particular, with objections. Now, there are two separate sets of objections and there are time limits now being extended, through the Bill, for objections. So let us start.

Under the Valuation of Land Act, that is the Bill that sets the base value, the annual rental value for the property, which will be used to calculate what the property tax is. And under that particular law that was amended in 2018, there was the introduction of two layers of appeals, the first layer being, one, the Commissioner of Valuations. So if one person receives a valuation for their property and they are dissatisfied, there are several grounds which they can file an objection to the Commissioner of Valuations saying you want a review of your valuation. And if you are dissatisfied by that or the Commissioner does not make a decision within 12 months, then you make an appeal to the valuation tribunal. So we are set on that, we are clear under the procedure under the Valuation of Land

Act.

Now, the Minister has, in fact, promulgated a particular order, Madam Speaker, that was published on 15 March, 2024, and it says:

For the purposes of the Valuation of Land Act, section 19, a period of six months after the service of a notice of valuation is appointed for the filing of an objection to the notice.

So let us analyze that. So they extended the period of six months after the date of service for you to now file an objection. The original time in the Act was 21 days after you got the notice of valuation.

Now, I have in my possession some persons who would have received notices of valuation, that they passed to me, from December. So, Madam Speaker, December 2023, six months later, will take us into around June 2023.

Dr. Moonilal: 2024.

Mr. S. Hosein: 2024, sorry. This Act now amends the law to say that property tax assessments have to be done by June 2024. So while you give the persons six months to make an objection, the BIR is going to already process your property tax with the original assessment. So the objection really does not have any meaningful effect, because the assessments would have already been prepared by June 2024, your deadline for filing an objection, if you have received your notice in December. What happens to the person who received their notices prior to December but the six months have already elapsed after this March 15, 2024 notice? Are they going to get that extension?

Madam Speaker, and that is a point that we have to understand what this Government is doing because this entire thing is not well thought out. Because when you look at the Bill, you will see inconsistencies. If I take you to the Property Tax Act objection system now, this assessment that would be done

through the Bill by June 2024, if you are dissatisfied with that, you do not go to the Commissioner of Valuations, you go to the Board of Inland Revenue. And if you are dissatisfied with the Board of Inland Revenue, your appeal lies with the Tax Appeal Board, not the valuation tribunal. So there are two separate streams but the two Acts are married with each other. So, Madam Speaker, that is a recipe for chaos in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: In matters of taxation, you try to make this thing as simplistic as possible for the ordinary man to understand, for there to be ordinary access and free access to their rights under due process that is inbuilt within laws, and I want to submit, Madam Speaker, that this law does not afford individuals that particular right because of the lack of clarity and the high levels of complexity when it comes to the objection system. It would mean that any ordinary citizen must be able to go into the BIR, able to fill out a form and lodge their objections. It cannot be that they do not have money to pay property tax but have to hire a lawyer for legal representation to take these matters forward. That simply cannot be what is being intended by this particular piece of legislation.

Now, this is also why I am saying that this is not well thought out, because the Minister also referred to deferrals, and I want to the make point very clear when it comes to deferrals. Because the Minister makes it seem as though that once you get this deferral, that is the end of it. That is not true, Madam Speaker. According to the form that is before us, this particular form outlines various categories in which persons can seek deferrals. And when you look at the Act in particular, which deals with the deferrals at section 23 and the amendment that came in 2018, a deferral only last for a period of two years. So you have to keep renewing this deferral after that two years, going back, proving your case, “Listen,

I cannot pay this tax,” keep deferring it, and when you kick the can down the road, that property tax is going to accumulate. So whoever becomes the eventual purchaser, inheritor of that property, will have to clear that property tax. It is clear that it is not an exception, it is only a deferral. It is a deferral.

And going back now, with the point on the objection, the Act is very clear, Madam Speaker, when it comes to the deferrals and when it comes to particular provisions with relation to the objection procedure. So one might think that, okay, I file my objection, so therefore, once I file my objection, it means that I do not have to pay the tax at the rate that was given to me. Ordinarily, one person would say, “Well, I do not agree if you assess my property annual rental value as being \$200,000 for the year. If I file my objection it means that I do not have to pay that particular tax.” Madam Speaker, that is not true. Once you file an objection, it does not operate as a stay. What that means? It means that you still have to pay the tax on that value and until a final adjudication of that objection, if the tax is reduced, then you will have an adjustment to what you would have paid. But you will have to pay the tax on whatever value that they have set in the notice of valuation and the property tax assessment forms.

So while the Government comes on the eve of a general election, trying to make it seem as though that they are a caring government, that they are giving persons a chance to object, that is not entirely the case. They can object but they will still have to pay the tax on what was assessed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: That point has to be made clear and driven home, Madam Speaker, that that does not prevent you from paying the tax. The tax is here, it is coming and it is going to hit you very hard; very hard.

Madam Speaker, I also want to raise some other points when it comes to the

other provisions in the Bill that deals with affirmative and negative resolution. In 2018, when the amendment first came with respect to the Schedules which we are currently going to amend, it now allows the Minister to amend these Schedules by way of negative resolution. So he simply has to say, “Today the tax is 2 per cent, next year it could be 10 per cent, the following year it could be 15 per cent, I do not have to come back to the Parliament.” All he has to do, by the stroke of a pen, he can change the interest rate—the rate for property tax, Madam Speaker. He can change the rate. And what the Minister had said in 2018—and this is why we have difficulty in trusting this Government, is this, and I quote from this *Hansard* of 11th of May, 2018, when the Senate was in committee. And the Minister is saying this:

“The important and fundamental Schedule that would impact upon people is Schedule I...”—which is the rate of interest

“Schedule I is the rate of tax, and I am proposing an amendment—before we deal with yours,”—he was speaking to Sen. Mark—“that would make any Minister responsible for taxes required to come and debate a change in the rate. So if we are going to change 3 per cent to 1 per cent or 5 per cent or 4 per cent or 5 per cent to 10 per cent as the case may be, the Minister will have to come and amend that schedule by affirmative resolution. So that is very important. So that one is affirmative.”

What happened, Madam Speaker? It is all of a sudden no longer important to the people of Trinidad and Tobago? Why is this Government ducking and afraid of accountability?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Come to the Parliament and justify if you have to adjust the rate of property tax. Why do you want to sit in your ivory tower, with a stroke of a pen, and tell people what they must pay, before you come to the Parliament and justify

to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, why you want to increase their rate of tax under this particular harsh regime? That cannot be right. We live in an accountable democracy and the Minister, we are proposing, should not escape accountability and must come to the Parliament and justify any rate increase in the future.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We are not taking that from this Government. We are not.

4.15 p.m.

And when it comes to discrepancies and anomalies with respect to the property tax, Madam Speaker, a person very close to where I live, passed me his Notice of Assessment in terms of their valuation. And the facts of it are, that he and his wife, elderly couple, they own a particular property, a house. They are joint-owners. There is one building, one house on the land, one house. So on the 7th of November, his wife received a notice indicating that the rental value of the house, the annual rental value, is \$57,162. Surprisingly—and that had a specific PIN number on it—on the 23rd of December, 2023, another notice was given to him with another PIN number indicating that the annual rental value for the property is now \$107, 583 and it came on two separate names two separate PIN numbers, same property Madam Speaker. And now he got a Notice of Assessment for the property tax. Madam Speaker, this can never ever be a proper system that is being implemented.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And Madam Speaker, I want for the sake of the people of Trinidad and Tobago to offer a reason why that might be so because it all deals with what happens at the Valuation Division. It all deals with what happens at the Valuation Division. And I have some documents in my hand that originated from the Office of the Commissioner of Valuations. So let us start with how they do the

assessments.

There is a document called Process for Use of Data from the District Revenue Office by the Valuation Division to facilitate the development of the Valuation Roll. And this was issued on the 11th August, 2020, just in time when they were now trying to populate the new Valuation Roll so that they can roll out the property tax regime. And they were given a list on instructions here, who are the field assessors in order to comply with. And Madam Speaker, there is step 1 that they would have looked for—they would be assigned to various communities, divisions. And then, they will have to schedule field visits, they want six field visits per day.

But then, step five is important and I want to read this. It says that you have to use detailed property addresses provided by the field assessors to locate the property. And there is a note and this is what the note reads. It says that it is also advisable when field assessors encounter an address that proves difficult to locate due to a lack of house number, lamp pole number et cetera, they utilize certain deductive strategies. These could entail, but are not limited to, identifying other house numbers or other properties on the street and counting either backward or forward to locate the subject property.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon Member: Walk backward down the road.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, this was the instructions that were given to the field assessors who are going to your home to determine what your annual rental value would be and that is the reason why we are in this mess today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Moonilal: Walk backward.

Mr. S. Hosein: And Madam Speaker, when you eventually walk forward,

backward, forward, backward, looking for the house, they now tell you what to do when you find the house.

They said from the curbside/roadside of the property—so this is a curbside valuation now Madam Speaker. I remember during COVID we had curbside pick-up and deliveries. Now we have your valuation being done curbside. So the first thing you do, you take photos—first priority. Note detailed address—when you find it. You take a GPS coordinate. I do not know how they are doing that, if they gave them devices. Note location description. Identify the type in terms of construction material.

Hon. Member: From outside on the curb.

Mr. S. Hosein: Identify property use/type from the curb. Note the land details topography and shape. Note building details; the number of floors, back, band and classification. Note buildings self-contained units. And hear this one, note construction details, the foundation.

Hon Member: From the curb?

Mr. S. Hosein: How are they seeing what the foundation looks like from the curb, Madam Speaker? This is an official document issued.

Hon Member: Minus if the dog rushed them.

Mr. S. Hosein: If possible beams, columns and air condition units. Note roof details, frame covering and profile. Note ancillary structures, porches, car ports, pools, storage area, sheds, if possible.

4.20 p.m.

Note external wall type and finish.

Note windows type and frame.

Note the number of bathrooms, if possible, from the curb.

Note services and sundries, utilities, drainage and access roads and identify

external defects and modifications if possible.

Madam Speaker, and you are all doing this from the roadside, from the curb.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: This is why we are in this mess here today, Madam Speaker, this is why we are in this mess.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Now, Madam Speaker, I have another internal memo and this is from Ms. Garraway-Howell, Acting Commissioner of Valuations, to All Valuers/Heads of Region, dated the 1st of September, 2020: Processing of Work for the Valuation Roll Development. So this is what it is saying. They are trying to populate again the valuation roll. Madam Speaker, it says that they were pulling files from the BIR, the Commissioner of State Lands, from PRESB in order to get property details, and then hear what it goes on to say. It says:

It is noteworthy to mention that an attempt was made to have the field assessors—who I have just mentioned—enter the data and numerous errors were observed.

This is on the valuation roll, therefore, you are required to pay particular attention to ensure that errors made are in fact corrected and this was since 2020 they were aware of these errors.

Again, Madam Speaker, I have another internal memo from the Valuation Division and this now deals with the quality of the persons and the qualifications of the persons who were conducting these assignments. This is to the Ministry of Finance Permanent Secretary from the Valuation Assistant III, Committees, November 12, 2018: Complaints in respect of the hiring procedure adopted for the employment of the contract position of Graduate Valuation Surveyor II, Ministry of Finance, Valuation Division, and it quotes:

This letter serves as a complaint into the hiring procedure of Graduate Valuation Surveyor II by the Ministry of Finance.

A letter of complaint, Madam Speaker, in terms of the hiring process of persons who are in charge of the valuation of properties. This is what it says:

The advertisement of Graduate Valuation Surveyor II which is attached, indicates the knowledge section that the applicant should possess a Bachelor of Science Degree in Estate Surveying or Bachelor of Science Degree in Property Valuation and Management and a successful completion of the final examination of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

I quote, Madam Speaker:

None of the candidates invited to the interview possessed the successful completion of the final examination of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors.

Hon. Members: “Ooooooh.”

Mr. S. Hosein: None of them.

Dr. Moonilal: Repeat that, repeat that.

Mr. S. Hosein:

None of the candidates invited to interview possessed the successful completion of the final examination of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors. This is a fundamental prerequisite at this level given the duties and responsibilities. It is an equivalent requirement of senior professional staff at the Valuation Division. All of the applicants should have been disqualified from the interview and the position re-advertised seeking persons with accredited RICS Degrees in valuation surveying.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, it says all of them should have been disqualified.

The advertised diploma in general practicing surveying must be differentiated from the diploma in surveying. There were applicants that possessed the latter and were allowed to interview. The technical diploma cannot be used for entry level into the professional class of Graduate Valuation Surveyor I, neither Graduate Valuation Surveyor II. Other applicants also possess undergraduate degrees which were not cognate to the field of valuation surveying—imagine that—such as land surveying. These degrees are not aligned to valuation surveying profession and these candidates ought to have been disqualified in the shortlisting process.

And if you think that is bad, Madam Speaker, this is where it gets worse. The interviewing panel was not properly constituted. The panel consisted of an HR officer and two valuation personnel holding the office of valuer. According to the advertisement, the GVS II reports to the Assistant Commissioner of Valuations and the members of the panel should be at least the post of Assistant Commissioner of Valuations or Commissioner of Valuations. Hear what it says:

A member of the panel valuer should not be the interviewer of a position that is equivalent or even higher. This implies that the successful GVS II candidate would have been interviewed by their subordinate staff.

Hon. Members: “Ohhh.”

Madam Speaker: Member for Barataria/San Juan, you have two more minutes left of original time. You are entitled to 15 more minutes to complete your contribution if you wish.

Mr. S. Hosein: I would so appraise myself of those. So, Madam Speaker, this is why people are complaining incessantly about this property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And I think it was incumbent on the Opposition today to reveal

these facts to the population—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein:—because, Madam Speaker, we are ever vigilant.

Dr. Moonilal: Thank you.

Mr. S. Hosein: And, Madam Speaker, I heard the Minister of Finance across the Floor making certain comments but I want to put it on the record that when during a budget debate on the 26th of September, 2022, the Minister of Finance—I am quoting him—he says:

“Members of the Tribunal have been appointed, with the recruitment of the Chairman in progress.”

This is in relation to the valuation tribunal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I simply could not trust him, I have a duty to the people of Barataria/San Juan and that of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: So I had to pen a letter to Her Excellency and Her Excellency wrote to me, Madam Speaker, by letter dated the 17th of November, 2023 when I asked if she had received the advice of the JLSC on the appointment of the Chairman of the valuation tribunal, her answer was no. When I asked her whether the Chairman of the valuation tribunal has been appointed and the name of the Chairman and the date of the appointment, she says:

In light of your answer to the question one, question two does not apply.

I asked her—

Madam Speaker: Member.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member. Yes, so just in terms of the letter, I am just reminding

you of Standing Order 48(8) in terms of that letter that you are purporting to use. Okay.

Mr. S. Hosein: Madam Speaker, I am just reading this particular correspondence into the record. And when I asked about whether Her Excellency has received the advice of the Minister and/or the Cabinet on the appointment of the four other members of the tribunal because it is a five-member tribunal, the response was that:

The President did receive the advice of Cabinet with respect to the four other members of the valuation tribunal but it was not considered prudent at the time to appoint the four other members of the tribunal.

What that simply means is that no tribunal was appointed. No tribunal existed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: The Minister came in a budget debate and said that the tribunal was in fact appointed, Madam Speaker. We cannot trust this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: We simply cannot trust this Government. We simply cannot trust this Government. We are ever vigilant. When I look across the floor, Madam Speaker, it seems as though the Government has collapsed on this debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And, Madam Speaker, with all of these issues I have identified with respect to the manner in which valuations are done, the persons who are doing the valuation, the process being used, the rate being used, I ask the Government, withdraw this Bill, bring a new one, repeal the entire Property Tax Act.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: This is something that should not be imposed on the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: You are affecting their constitutional right of property, the enjoyment of property. You want to impose an arbitrary, inconsistent tax that is only oppressive and will seek to bring more hardship to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: I call on this Government, Madam Speaker, to do the honourable thing: repeal this Property Tax Act.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And when they pass that Act, we then ask them to dissolve the Parliament and call the general election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Hosein: And with these few words, Madam Speaker, I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker and thank you very much for recognizing me as I make my very brief contribution to this Bill, the Property Tax (Amdt.) Bill, 2024.

Madam Speaker, I listened to my colleague, the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan and early in his contribution to this debate, the hon. Member in seeking to place on the parliamentary record and to advance his argument in support of everything that he said in his contribution, placed reliance on unproclaimed sections of the Municipal Corporations Act. Therefore, I thought as an experienced attorney, perhaps with the intention of aspiring to be an Attorney General, God forbid, I thought he would have been sincere enough to point out to the listeners and the viewers and all Members of this House that those provisions

that he made reference to, to support his argument have been in fact unproclaimed legislation. Therefore, everything that came after made absolutely no sense because to advance his argument, he had to create something, some strawman to destroy, but in so doing, Madam Speaker, it was devoid of merit and it was far away from the reality.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, far away from reality. Far away from reality but I think someone set him up. I believe he may have been passed prepared text and he did not get the time to research and to undertake the necessary understanding and reading before he advanced his argument in this Parliament.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia, the hon. Leader of the Opposition, made reference again to a so-called inheritance tax, something that is being peddled by the Opposition for months. Even to the lead-up to the local government election last year, the Leader of the Opposition spoke about an inheritance tax and more and more, the hon. Leader made reference or makes reference to an inheritance tax, you realize that there are different versions of what is being referred to as an inheritance tax.

Today, in her contribution, Madam Speaker, I heard that the basis for an inheritance tax is because the property tax is linked to property and therefore on that basis, it makes it an inheritance tax. So therefore, all of what she has said in the past in relation to an inheritance tax, she did not have the courtesy to explain to the population that her understanding or meaning of an inheritance tax is because a tax is ascribed to property. Therefore, Madam Speaker, going on that rationale, the current rate for water in Trinidad and Tobago is linked to property, the value of property. And if one were to accept the argument of the Leader of the Opposition that the implementation of property tax is in fact inheritance tax because it is

linked to property, then your WASA rate is also inheritance tax, according to the Leader of the Opposition. That is what we are fed with here in Port of Spain today by someone who aspires, God forbid, once again, to be a Prime Minister. But of course, we must not underestimate the good judgement of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago because we will not make that error.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: So, Madam Speaker, the Leader of the Opposition came to Parliament and she talked about wars and revolution and she pointed to all kinds of social eruptions throughout the course of human history with respect to property tax. I was not surprised. We know their behaviour. We know the things that they do, by gaslighting the population to instil in the population fear and trepidation with respect to an important issue as it relates to tax collection in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, we understand that the issue of tax collection is a very passionate one. Anywhere around the world where we talk about tax collection, it generates a lot of interest because it impacts the ordinary citizens. Madam Speaker, the issue of property tax has been around since 2010. As a matter of fact, the elections of 2010 were premised—a significant component of the elections of 2010 was based on property tax or “Axe the Tax”.

4.35 p.m.

As a matter of fact, Madam Speaker, it is the Leader of the Opposition, aspiring to be Prime Minister towards 2010—in the 2010 general election, promised the people of Trinidad and Tobago that if they were to elect the government or her party in that 2010 general elections, that property tax is going to be abolished. Madam Speaker, 63 months in office, with a constitutional majority of 26 seats; 63 months in office, not one move, contrary to the promises made by

the Leader of the Opposition, the then aspirant to be Prime Minister, occupied the corridors of power and did not bring to Parliament not one piece of legislation to support what she promised the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Because it is all about, Madam Speaker, for them, what sounds good, what looks good, and do what you must do, say what you must say in order to do get into office.

Madam Speaker, the people of Trinidad and Tobago are fed up with that kind of old politicking. The people of Trinidad and Tobago expect us, when we are elected to office, to be truthful to our oath of office and do what we must do to protect their interest. We would have seen, Madam Speaker, even to the lead-up of that 2015 elections, where there has been rising expenditure and government's revenues continue to fall precipitously, international financial rating agencies imploring the Government to do what you must do to collect all of your taxes to increase your revenues, so that you can fund the operations of government, and one of the things that they pointed out to us as a Government and as a people is that we must collect our taxes so that we can fund the operations of government.

Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance is not playing "Play-Whe". It is not about "whe-whe". He is not picking "jumbie beads" in the Ministry of Finance. It requires money to fund the operations of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: And that is the reason why the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries is all over, doing what we must do to increase our revenue position, to improve the circumstances of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Being truthful to our oath of office, Madam Speaker, we said that we are going to uphold the Constitution and the law. The property tax is law—the Property Tax Act, Madam Speaker, it is law. It is our sacred duty to ensure that those laws are enforced so that we can govern the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, this issue of property tax in Trinidad and Tobago has cost us over \$14 billion. The non-collection of taxes in Trinidad and Tobago has cost the taxpayers, the honest citizen of Trinidad and Tobago, over \$14 billion because we have not done anything to collect the taxes since 2010. I am to ask the people of Trinidad and Tobago, have your circumstances improved as a result of that non-collection of \$14 billion? What can that \$14 billion do for us a country? The Government has passed legislation, and in the several pieces of legislation that we have passed, we have said that as part of our local government reform, that the property taxes will be remitted to our local government corporations so that they could fund their various activities, Madam Speaker.

As the hon. Member for San Fernando West indicated, a chairman of a UNC regional corporation complained that with the reduction of taxes from 3 per cent to 2 per cent, significant sums of money would be forgone as a result, or would be lost. But, Madam Speaker, we have been here for some time, going on four years, and we would have heard over and over and over again, Members of Parliament coming and they are demanding lights, they are demanding roads, they are demanding water, they are demanding garbage collection, making all kinds of demands, as they must, to represent their constituents and their burgesses. We have no qualms about that, they must do that.

As a matter of fact, we are all representatives of the people and we are here to advocate on their behalf. But these things, Madam Speaker, cost millions and millions of dollars. And if the Government is saying that we must collect our property taxes, ensure that we have a fair and equitable tax regime so that we can gather the necessary financial resources to improve the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, to improve communities, to ensure that grounds are lit, to

ensure that roads are fixed, to ensure that box drains are constructed, to ensure that roads are paved—Madam Speaker, the things that we hear on a continuous basis as we walk through—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—and talk to our people, as we walk through the streets the complaints that we hear, Madam Speaker, they go directly to the heart of local government. And the Government is saying let us collect the taxes as fair and as equitable as possible so that our regional corporations and our state agencies can have access to financial resources to improve the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, what is so offensive about that, Madam Speaker? And as the hon. Member for San Fernando West rightly said, if you do not want us to collect the taxes, as we must in accordance with the law, then tell us what we can do to replace property taxes so that we can fund the operations of government and improve our communities? Tell us what we must do.

Madam Speaker, \$14 billion we have forgone so far over the years in the non-collection of taxes. What could that have done do the people and for the people of Diego Martin? What could it have done to the people of Siparia, the people of Princes Town, the people of Mayaro, Chaguanas West, the people of Arima and in my constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West? What could have \$14 billion have done to improve their circumstances, Madam Speaker? But they prefer to rile up their supporters, burn tyres, even led by some Members of Parliament, say the worst things about the Government neglecting their affairs, that is what they want. They have no genuine interest whatsoever towards improving people's lives because as long as things continue to go wrong, according to them, it presents an opportunity for them to be in government. But for every proposal and every initiative of this Government that we have brought before this Parliament,

Madam Speaker, it has met with continuous resistance and an inability to put forward solutions and programmes as an alternative to improve the lives of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

The Government has not made it a secret. Since 2015, it has been our position, and our settled position, that property tax will be implemented so that we can improve lives, that we can improve our revenue position, so that we can take some of these collections and the revenues to channel some of it, or all of it, for our local government corporations to improve our communities. And in doing so, Madam Speaker, a number of pieces of amendments were brought forward as the Government sought towards improving and ensuring that we have a legislative framework that is fair and that is equitable for all the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And it is for that reason there are provisions within our Property Tax Act, Madam Speaker, where the weak and the vulnerable citizens can make an application for their deferral of taxes. Fair and equitable. Where around this world, where in the Caribbean—they talk about us being like Jamaica, being like Barbados, they love to do that. But in every country in the Caribbean, Madam Speaker, they have a property tax system, and they have a system that is based upon the capital values of properties, unlike us, which is based and premised on the annual rental value of the properties.

The Minister of Finance would have said that the normal property valuing \$1 million in the United States, you would have to pay over \$20,000 in tax annually. In Trinidad and Tobago, what is being proposed is \$2,000 annually, and with this reduction, it is going to go further by 33 per cent, Madam Speaker. In addition to that, provisions in the Act to allow for pensioners and persons who, for one reason or the other, cannot pay their property tax, can make the necessary application for their tax to be deferred. What is so offensive about that? What is

so offensive about that?

And as the Government sought to improve and to impose and to collect property taxes on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, we recognized that there have been anomalies. I walked in my constituency, in the Bon Air West area, a couple weeks ago, and some of the observations of the folks at the Ministry of Finance and the Valuation Division, some of those concerns were raised with me, where some property owners said that their tax assessments and the valuations that they received were far different from their neighbours on the opposite side of the street and they needed time in order to make the necessary, or express the necessary concerns to the Valuation Division and the Board of Inland Revenue with respect to some of those anomalies.

And the Government is saying, through this piece of amendment, that we need the time to ensure that all of queries and all of the concerns that were expressed by many people around Trinidad and Tobago, with respect to the valuation of properties, that we will get the time—the Commissioner of Valuations, the Board of Inland Revenue will take the time and go through some of these queries by extending the assessment period; the Government doing what it can within its legal remit to ensure that we have a fair and equitable tax regime, Madam Speaker.

In addition to that, the reduction of taxes from 2 per cent to 3 per cent is an average 33 per cent reduction in taxes. Having listened to the concerns of so many of our stakeholders and our citizens all over Trinidad and Tobago, the Government has taken a decision to reduce taxes from 2 per cent to 3 per cent. Is the Opposition saying that we ought not to do that? What is your response to it? Are you saying that we should not reduce the taxes by 33 per cent?

Mr. Ram: Repeal, repeal. That is what I am saying, repeal this whole thing.

Hon. M. Gonzales: And it is not about repealing. And if you are saying it is about repealing, then tell us what we must do—

Hon. Member: Exactly.

Hon. M. Gonzales:—in replacement. You see, because they talk about repealing because it sounds good, it makes the necessary sound bite so that they will continue to—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—fool the people of Trinidad and Tobago. But they spent 63 months, Madam Speaker, in office; 63 months, what prevented them—what prevented the People's Partnership, led by the UNC, from repealing the legislation, if that was their intention? It was not their intention.

Mr. Ram: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: Madam Speaker, the Member just continues to disturb me but I will try my best to ignore him. Vacuous noise as usual, Madam Speaker, empty noises; empty noises, nothing of value and substance to offer to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, but just noise and bacchanal and confusion, and say it and make it up as we go along. I am wondering what is taking place in the UNC and the Opposition, you know.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Why?

Hon. M. Gonzales: Because it is just chaos and confusion. You come here, you made a case, three speakers so far, or two, and cannot advocate one alternative to the property tax regime in Trinidad and Tobago. We have forgone \$14 billion I have said; \$14 billion. Where can we get that revenue to improve our living circumstances? Where, Madam Speaker? The Member for Bartaria/San Juan talked about the need for the Government to leave the affirmative resolution in section 52, as opposed to negative resolution.

4.50p.m.

Madam Speaker, this point has been debated on numerous occasions in this Parliament. The Member for Barataria/San Juan is an attorney. Yes, I think he is an attorney. He has graduated and called to the Bar in law school, and the Member for Barataria/San Juan understands that even though legislation is passed or enacted by negative resolution of Parliament, it does not remove the oversight of the Parliament. As a matter of fact, the Standing Orders are very clear, that there is a time period that is prescribed for a Motion to be filed to negative or to debate the Order. So even though regulations have been done in accordance with negative resolution of Parliament, as opposed to affirmative resolution of Parliament, the Standing Order provides for there to be parliamentary oversight by the filing of the appropriate order. And, therefore, as we are proposing to do; to give the Minister of Finance the power to make the necessary amendments to the Schedule by negative resolution of Parliament, any Member of Parliament, including Members of the Opposition, can file the requisite Order to have the notice debated in Parliament, and if it is passed then it would be negated. It is as simple as that, Madam Speaker.

But to come and give the impression that by removing affirmative and having it replaced by negative that there will be no parliamentary oversight is simply not true, Madam Speaker. Again, again, the Opposition in their usual form and their usual style, using hysteria, trying to gaslight the population, trying to frighten the population, as if the Government has something to hide by making regulations via negative resolution of Parliament, Madam Speaker, it is simply not true.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: It is simply not true. And, therefore, Madam Speaker, the

matters before us, this Bill, it will reduce the rate of residential property tax from 3 per cent to 2 per cent, as I have said, a 33 per cent reduction of property tax. It will also extend the time in relation to the year 2024, for the Board of Inland Revenue to issue Notices of Assessment up to June 30, 2004. This will permit more time for the Valuation Division to review valuations under query and adjust, where necessary, and advise the Board of Inland Revenue of any tax assessments that are required to be updated.

Madam Speaker, the amendment will allow for the extension of all applicable time periods by Order, as the case may be, under the Valuation Act. And this ensures that Government can extend any further time limits under the Property Tax Act if required, inclusive, but not limited to, the date upon which property tax is to be paid and the date upon which penalties are incurred.

Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago, perhaps, might be the only country in the Western Hemisphere or perhaps the world where the argument and the national conversation is whether or not citizens should pay a fair and equitable tax on their properties. Jamaica, Barbados, Guyana, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, the Bahamas, the United States of America, Netherlands, the United Kingdom, all over the world, Madam Speaker, there is a system of property taxes that will allow citizens to make their necessary contribution in order that the Government can collect the necessary revenues to fund the operations of government.

Despite the fact that property tax in Trinidad and Tobago has been law since 2010, it is very unfortunate that we continue to make this a political football, hoping that it creates an opening for the Opposition to come into Government by gaslighting the population, by fooling the population, by giving them the impression that should they be elected into government that they are going to

repeal the Property Tax Act, nothing could be further from the truth, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: The reality is that the non-implementation or the non-collection of taxes in Trinidad and Tobago has cost us \$14 billion, and this has been impacted negatively the people of Lopinot/Bon Air West.

I walked again in my constituency and no one in my constituency was opposed to the paying of taxes, not one person in the constituency of Lopinot/Bon Air West told me that they were opposed to paying their taxes. They expressed genuine and sincere concerns with respect to the annual rental value and the values that were placed on the other anomalies, and they asked: Can the Government take a look at the valuations that were being proposed for properties? That is why I am very happy to stand here representing them, not only the Government as Minister of Public Utilities, but as their representative in the Parliament that we have heard their cries, we have listened to their concerns and we are doing what we must do as parliamentarians and legislators to make the necessary amendments to ensure that we have a fair and equitable tax regime, so that the Government can fund their operations either be it through the central government agencies or the local government agencies.

The Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation is one of the largest regional corporations in Trinidad and Tobago, comprising hundreds of thousands of burgesses, Madam Speaker, is set to collect, perhaps, somewhere in the region of \$20 million or \$30 million in the collection property tax, perhaps less now with the reduction of property taxes from 3 per cent to 2 per cent. But I can tell you, Madam Speaker, the amount of drains that can be repaired, the amount of recreational facilities that can be repaired, the amount of streetlights that can be

repaired and the various initiatives that can be proposed within the locality of the Tunapuna/Piarco Regional Corporation to improve their lives. And why, as a Member of Parliament, I would stand and say to repeal that, forego the hundreds of millions of dollars, that should be used and be put to use to improve their living circumstances without even offering one initiative that will increase revenue and bring about the necessary revenue to fund some of these activities?

It is not about coming to Parliament and saying what about the potholes. The Minister of Works should resign. What about our recreational facilities and the cleaning of drains and the Minister of Local Government should resign or the burnt types, about not having water in some of our localities and regional corporations that they do not have financial resource to get water trucks to feed some of our communities, especially now in this dry season, Madam Speaker. It is not about that. There is a time for politics, but there is a time for seriousness when we come here. And it is very unfortunate that for the four years I have been here observing the Opposition, opposing every single measure, would be truthful to their oath of office and come here and present plans and programmes as an alternative.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, your original speaking time is now spent, you have 15 more minutes.

Hon. M. Gonzales: I will make use of it, Madam Speaker. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. So, Madam Speaker, this property tax debate and this, what we are doing here is not whether or not we should have property tax or not in Trinidad and Tobago. That is not the purpose of this debate. The law is already here. The law is already passed. What we are trying to do is to address some challenges that were experienced as the Government and the state agencies, the Board of Inland Revenue, the employees of the Board of Inland Revenue, the employees of the

Valuation Division that they have encountered, the complaints that we have received as a Government, with respect to the implementation of property taxes and the Government doing what it must to address some of those deficiencies, and these things are quite normal.

We draft legislation, as we have done, with respect to the disposal of property and the procurement Act and we came here on numerous occasions, Madam Speaker, and we made amendments. Because in passing some parent laws we may not have taken into consideration some intricacies and some challenges. And as you rollout and as you seek to implement some of these laws, there are times that you come and perfect what we try do, because we would not have taken into consideration some matters that may have arose during the implementation of laws, and that is what we are doing here.

The Leader of the Opposition came here and tried to correct again and rewrite history, based on what was read or told to the country in 2013 or 2014; that property tax will be implemented. I was shocked, Madam Speaker, to hear the Opposition Leader reading from a corrected statement by the former Minister of Finance as to what he was trying to tell the country. But I was more shocked when the Leader of the Opposition said well, it was said effectively—that is what she said—even though it was read out in Parliament, it was not a policy of the Government. What was taking place when they were in Government; that a budget statement, where a government read a budget policy that property tax would be implemented, had to retract what was said, and we hear from the Leader of the Opposition who was the Prime Minister then, trying to rewrite history saying that it was not a policy of their Government. So you are saying you did not have a Cabinet meeting before that budget statement was read? Is that how this Government and this country was being run between 2010 and 2015? I think it is

most frightening. And, perhaps, the Leader of the Opposition, in trying to rewrite history as she tried to do earlier on today in this proceeding, should have apologized to the people of Trinidad and Tobago for the manner in which this country was governed between 2010 and 2015.

It is most unfortunate that a Minister of Finance coming to Parliament, reading out a policy position on the implementation of property tax, sought to retract that statement and today we heard, for the very first time, by the Leader of the Opposition, who was then Prime Minister, that this really was not discussed and decided by her Cabinet. I find that to be very, very disconcerting and very frightening. Because that is not how you expect a Cabinet to be run. That is not how you expect a country to be governed. But after all, Madam Speaker, this is the UNC.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is the UNC, and we expect that. Madam Speaker, I was very happy when the Minister of Finance, in his statements on this matter last week, told the country that some of the other legislative provisions for the full implementation of property tax in Trinidad and Tobago, regulations have been put in place. And I refer specifically, Madam Speaker, to the property tax deferral of assessed tax application forms, regulations 2024, which would facilitate applications for deferral under 23 of the Act. So, we now have a system and a legislative formula that would allow persons to make applications for the deferral of assessed tax application. And the forms and the regulations have been laid and will be implemented at that point in time.

5.05 p.m.

The valuation of land appointed time for objection to Valuation of Land Order, 2024, to also be in place, and this would increase the time to file an

objection to the notice of valuation after six months of the service of that notice, and the time period before that, Madam Speaker, was three months. So, we are now extending the time for the filing of objections from three months to six months. Again, doing what we must, Madam Speaker, to ensure that we have a fair and equitable tax regime for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: So, it is not only about reducing the tax from 3 percent to 2 percent, but it is also ensuring that those persons who are vulnerable in the society, even though we will have some of the lowest rates for property tax in the entire region, but ensuring that we have a system in place to protect the weak and the vulnerable citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And I want to challenge any speaker on the Opposition, who may follow after me, and throughout this debate that whilst you came here with your prepared text, with your messages sent by your handlers, that it must all be, “repeal property tax” and “repeal property tax”, have the courtesy to tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago what is your alternative. Where are we going to get the hundreds of millions of dollars and billions of dollars to fund the operation of government? Where are we going to get the financial resources to empower our local government authorities to get the financial resources—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—to improve the communities all over Trinidad and Tobago. It is not about complaints, it is not about burning tyres, it is not only about blocking roads, and using some of these issues, and riding it like a tiger to make yourself politically relevant. Come here with plans and proposals because that is what the people of Trinidad and Tobago expect of their elected representatives.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: That is what they expect. So, it is all well and good to come and talk about “repeal property tax, it is wicked, it is evil”—

Hon. Members: That is what they say.

Hon. M. Gonzales:—that is what they say. Madam Speaker, when I see the UNC, not my colleagues opposite, I am talking about the UNC, I see wickedness, and I see evil.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: I will ask you to retract that.

Hon. M. Gonzales: I retract that, Madam Speaker. I was being very particular, that I am referring to my colleagues on the opposite—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: But, Madam Speaker, again, I implore all of my colleagues opposite, including my friend from Pointe-a-Pierre, I hope my friend from Mayaro speaks, as the budding Leader of the Opposition, or the shadow Leader of the Opposition. You know we have plenty shadows inside of here, you know, Madam Speaker. We have the shadow Minister of Public Utilities, we have the shadow or the ghost—no, no, no, I would not say ghost, I retract that Madam Speaker. [*Laughter*] We have the ghost or the shadow Minister of Finance, we have the shadow Minister of Education.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Member: They say they “doh” have the—

Hon. M. Gonzales: Oh, no, no. Unworthy, unworthy.

Hon. Member: Basically. [*Laughter*]

Hon. M. Gonzales: We have someone trying their best to be the shadow Minister of Public Utilities. I feel very, very sorry for him, but he can try his best—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Hon. M. Gonzales:—he could try his best, but Madam Speaker, let us be serious, I implore all of my colleagues, as you come here with your prepared lines, “repeal property tax, repeal property tax”, have the decency and the courtesy, to tell the people of Trinidad and Tobago what are your plans and what are your alternatives. And if you are not prepared to do that, then stop playing political games and taking the people of this country for fools. Because we are not.

5.10 p.m.

Because you had 63 months to do what you said that you were going to do, and you did not do it; you did not do it. So therefore, your posture and your positions today are nothing but hypocritical.

Hon. Member: What?

Hon. M. Gonzales: Hypocritical. The people of Trinidad and Tobago expect their leaders to do what they must to protect their interest, and that is what we are doing through the introduction of this Property Tax (Amdt.) Bill, 2024, Madam Speaker.

I am looking forward to when I am walking in my constituency this week and next week, to report to the people of Bon Air West, the people of Five Rivers, the people of Lopinot, and Surrey, and La Florissante, and Bregon Park, all of those communities, I will be proud to report to them what we have done here today because we have listened to their cries, we have listened to their complaints and we have acted upon it to improve the regime for the collection of revenue to fund the governance of their interest.

And therefore, Madam Speaker, I support this amendment and I believe that Trinidad and Tobago will continue to stand out as one of the very few countries, if not the only country in the world, that will have a tax regime that is fair and that is equitable, and that it will always protect our weak and vulnerable citizens. Madam

Speaker, I thank you very much for my intervention.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in encapsulating the pulse of the population on this property tax issue—and what has resulted in that pulse is what we are seeing happening today. And there is an old adage that says that:

“The power of the people is...stronger than the people in power.”

And today, we are seeing that, Madam Speaker. I repeat that, because today is a victory for the United National Congress—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—and the people of Trinidad and Tobago. And that is why I remind Members opposite of the old adage that says:

“The power of the people is...stronger than the people in power.”

Today, I want to congratulate the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—who has been at the forefront of fighting this dreaded property tax since it was first introduced and brought to this House in 2009.

I heard the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West speak about hypocrisy, and the Member said, “Well, why did they not repeal it?” I want to remind the hon. Member, that on assuming office in a snap general election in 2010, staying in office for just over five years, the Leader of the Opposition, then Prime Minister as she was, ensured that not one Sitting of this House of Representatives ever dealt with the property tax, in terms of imposition—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—of the property tax for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker. Instead, then Prime Minister, Cabinet Note No. 1, she dealt with people-centric issues. It was the establishment of the Children’s Life Fund as opposed to the dreaded property tax, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: That was where her heart, her body, her soul and her mind is, Madam Speaker, in the welfare of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I heard the Member for Diego Martin North/East, at the very start of the Member’s contribution, spoke about Members opposite who have properties abroad. And the Member indicated that he was aware at least one Member of the Opposition had properties abroad. And I think the hon. Member, sometimes in a very convoluted, distracted sort of way, tends to forget selectively because in those days, between 2009, when the Bill was brought, he was serving a different master then, Madam Speaker; a very different master then, and he had a very different tune while he was singing for his supper in that administration.

Mr. Indarsingh: “Ohhh”.

Mr. B. Padarath: But you see, Madam Speaker, they say yesterday is yesterday and today is today. I wonder why the hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East did not tell us about the Member in the Government who owns property in the United States. You see, Madam Speaker, posted on one of his own Member’s Facebook page just recently was their Integrity Commission Form A, and when you go to the area of property, one of the Government Members speaks about a property in Las Vegas. And I encourage the Member for Diego Martin North/East—it may be very close to him.

Mr. Imbert: What?

Mr. B. Padarath: It may be very, very close to him.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So while I understand that you may be responding, I have always said that not everything that is tangential needs a response. Let us get on with the matter, please.

Mr. B. Padarath: Certainly, Madam Speaker, certainly. Just to say that the hon. Minister may want to look to his left and right to get examples of those who have properties abroad.

Madam Speaker, the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West spoke about the Leader of the Opposition introducing this issue of an inheritance tax, and that our argument, the Member for Siparia that is, her argument was that generations to come—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. B. Padarath: I will send you the note whose Facebook.

Mr. Indarsingh: Put it in his mailbox. [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Padarath: You may want to serve a different master after that. Madam Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West spoke about the inheritance tax and rightfully so, the Member for Siparia described it as a debt tax. Because what we will see happening, Madam Speaker, if this Bill is not repealed today—and there are categories in the Bill that does allow for these deferrals, that if persons are unable, whether they are pensioners, they are unable because they are from the lower rung in terms of being unable, Madam Speaker, to pay the property tax, and they apply for these deferrals, then persons who inherit the land, the properties they will then have to pay. And therefore, that will build over a cumulative period, Madam Speaker, and that is why we say in that context, it is going to be a debt tax being inherited by those to come.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: We have made the point, and the Member for Diego Martin

North/East and the Member for Diego Martin West have been at great pains to say they do not know where the Member for Siparia and the Opposition has gotten this inheritance tax from. But it would not be the first time, Madam Speaker, that the Member for Diego Martin North/East, aided and abetted by the Member for Diego Martin West or vice versa, has misled this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And I will give you two examples, Madam Speaker. You see, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air went all over the place, giving examples of the hypocrisy and the contradictions. I want to remind the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, it is not me, the Member for Princes Town, that the *Trinidad Express* is writing editorials with headlines calling: “Gonzales’ contradiction”, because the Member does not know if he is going left or right, Madam Speaker. It is the hon. Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West who cannot get his facts right—

Mrs. Haynes-Alleyne: Find his bearings.

Mr. B. Padarath:—or find his bearings. Madam Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West seemed to have conveniently forgotten that when he speaks about contradictions and he speaks about hypocrisy by the Opposition, that it was his Government and his Prime Minister who, with a straight face, told this country, “If you did not hear me right and you were closing the fridge door, we are not closing down Petrotrin.” Today, Madam Speaker, Petrotrin is closed down, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: So, Member for Princes Town, while I might understand what you are trying to do, I do not think you will allow you to widen the debate in that way. I sat here, I heard contradictions and hypocrisy in a particular context which is related to the matter at issue. So while you have a right to reply, please confine it

to the matter at issue.

Mr. B. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I move on to a few of the points that were made in the debate by both the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West as well as the Member for San Fernando West. And while the Member for Barataria/San Juan raised several issues in the context of local government reform and some of the issues that were traversed by the Member for San Fernando West, one of the comments coming from the Member from San Fernando West had to do with parts of the reform, parts of the legislation as it relates to property tax, et cetera, as not being proclaimed, Madam Speaker. That was the argument, a very “feek” and “weeble” one—feeble one—well, “weeble” probably too—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—from the Member for San Fernando West with respect to those issues traversed by the Member for Barataria/San Juan.

However, Madam Speaker, having had that legislation pass through this House, go before public consultations, having several reiterations and reincarnations of local government reform in the context of linking it to property tax, Madam Speaker, what the legislation does, it tells you what is the position of the Government. It tells you what is the intention of the Government, and the position and intention of the Government is very clear. And that was the point that the Member for Barataria/San Juan was linking the legislation to, in terms of the collection of property tax through the regional corporations, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West spoke about water being linked to the value of property and just on Friday last, we dealt with the development loans in that debate, and we dealt with the issue of water and the impact that it has, in terms of property and property value. But, Madam Speaker,

there are large swaths of this country today that do not have water on those properties. The same properties the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West spoke about, in terms of property value, many of them receive bills but they do not receive water in their taps.

And therefore, when you look at civilized, sophisticated societies that have this property tax, Madam Speaker, water is one of those things that is featured, in terms of the property tax, in terms of how properties are valued, in terms of public utilities, and the reliability of things like water and electricity on public utilities as it links to the property tax that is paid, and that is applied in several of these other countries, particularly the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and so on, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, if we were to talk about—as the Minister spoke earlier about water, and the value of property linked to water, and how that is juxtaposed in terms of the evaluations of property tax, one has to make the argument, Madam Speaker, that in order for you to justify property tax in its entirety, when you look at the genesis of property tax in several of these jurisdictions, Madam Speaker, the United States, Canada, the UK, even in the Commonwealth and in the Caribbean, the linkage between these public utilities, not only water but electricity, even the postal service that the Minister refused to address earlier because he only spoke about water—but I could understand why the Minister refused to also link it, as several other countries throughout the region, the Commonwealth and the world have linked it to their evaluations of property tax. I understand why the Minister had the disconnect with respect to electricity and why the Minister had the disconnect with respect to the postal service, because among the public utilities sector in this country, when you link it to the evaluation of the property tax, Madam Speaker, it is among the most abysmal in terms of performance. But that

is the legacy of the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Because you have been there for four and a half years, to hear just en passant, in two words you mentioned water in terms of property value, Madam Speaker, but there are other linkages, in terms of the consideration of the evaluation of property tax, that we heard absolutely nothing about that. Instead, all we got a song and dance about was the Minister walking in his constituency and people telling him, “Boy, well, you know, things hard and maybe you all need to lower it,” and so on.

Madam Speaker, there is no one in this country who will tell you today that they prefer to pay 2 per cent as opposed to 3 per cent. You know what they are saying on the streets, Madam Speaker? They prefer to pay zero per cent because they “doh” get water—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—they are going to get higher electricity rates and they have an unreliable postal service. So the Minister, when he is walking, he should seek to address those issues and juxtapose that against the reality of supporting the property tax, knowing very well the countries that he spoke about earlier, that they are able to offer a greater degree and a better degree of service, quality service, of water, electricity and postal service before going to their population, saying, “Support the property tax.”

5.25 p.m.

And Madam Speaker, that is one of the arguments coming from the Opposition.

We are saying—and the Minister spoke about it “eh.” He said, well, you know, things are so bad in the country and that we need this property tax and the

Opposition is not telling us where we are going to get this \$14 billion from? From day one, day one, when they got into government, in 2015, the Leader of the Opposition and every Member of the then Opposition followed in 2020 to where we are today, nine budgets later, Madam Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago, we can say safely to you and to the Government, that we did not complain, we did not cry. We told you what to do then, we have been telling you for the past nine years and today I will tell you again, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: Because the argument of the Government is that they have a deficit of \$14 billion and the only way that they could see this \$14 billion is by imposing hardship on the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I say that in the context of just a few days ago, the Member for Diego Martin North/East, after the Member for Barataria/San Juan really woke up the country and said to them: It is not that the Government has scrapped and it is not taking the recommendations of the SRC but rather it has been sent for review.

And I say that Madam Speaker, because today the argument coming particularly from the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, is that they need the money. That the backdrop of the country, in terms of the economy, things are so bad, but you are asking—and if we are to take it in a very simplistic way—I know my colleague from Tabaquite has the penchant for putting across that the average man can understand. And I want to bring it to that level, Madam Speaker, because there is a particular interest in terms of today's debate and I will tell you why.

The national community has so much interest in this because while the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West just stood in this House and told us the backdrop against the deficit of that \$14 billion, the defence of the Member for the Diego Martin North/East, in terms of what is contained in the Salary Review

Commission's report, is that people are asking, generally in the country, you want us to pay this tax while your salaries are going up. But tell me where am I, the average man getting the residual income to pay, not only property tax, higher electricity rates, higher water rate against a backdrop of massive unemployment in the country—

Hon. Member: Food prices.

Mr. B. Padarath: —runaway inflation, high prices in the supermarket. And putting it at a layman's level, Madam Speaker, that essentially puts the debate in context in a nutshell, for the average man, woman and child to understand because that is the question people are asking.

Madam Speaker, the issues affecting property tax coupled with everything else, all the other taxes and the general conditions of the country, I always say: People in this country will only respond and rile up and I heard the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West say: Well, they will burn tires, they will protest roads, they will encourage their constituents to rile up—but it is only when these hardships affect your pockets and it affects your homes, that you understand the reality. And every single person in this country today understands that the property tax, whether it is 3 per cent, whether it is 2 per cent, whether it is 1 per cent, it affects their pockets and it affects their homes at a time, at a time, Madam Speaker, when many of them do not know where their next meal is coming from.

And therefore, we want to place on the public record and make it abundantly clear that our position has remained consistent and that is, we support zero per cent property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: We have called on this Government to do the right thing and repeal this Act. And therefore, while we are telling you to repeal this Act, once

more, in response to the Member for the Diego Martin North/East and the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, we will tell you where because you have been asking us, you have been telling us: Tell us where. Where would the \$14 billion come from? If you had done what we told you since 2015, you would be in a much better position—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: —than you are today. I heard the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West speak about handlers and what the handlers of the Opposition are telling them to do. Before I go into telling you what you should be doing, you know the Member for Chaguanas East in another debate told them, they need to mind their own business.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: They need their mind your own business, fix your own house, you have this country in a total disarray. People in this country like you do not know if they are going, or they coming, they are struggling to survive. Madam Speaker, I do not think you understand what is the psyche or the psychological impact. When we come here we could still put on a jacket and tie. You could still go outside there and buy a box of Chinese food or a box of KFC—

Madam Speaker: Member, I do understand your passion but please be a little sensitive to our earbuds, please.

Mr. B. Padarath: Yes, Madam Speaker. And Madam Speaker, the psyche of this nation has never been more damaged before. And who is responsible for that damage when you think about property tax? You think about people having to worry about the possibility of losing their homes if they are unable to pay this tax. The psyche of this country, Madam Speaker, is in the doldrums because of this People's National Movement administration.

You know, Madam Speaker, I told you earlier, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West and the Member for Diego Martin North/East, and I assume all of their speakers have been lamenting about this \$14 billion. And first I want to make the point before I move on to where they could have found that \$14 billion. When they speak about the assistance that this property tax will give to regional corporations and I heard the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West reference a comment that was made by the Chairman of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation. And I want to quote from that article Sunday, March 17th 2024, and this is what the Member spoke of earlier, the Member for San Fernando West and the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air alluded to it. I quote Madam Speaker. Chairman of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation Ryan Rampersad said:

“...while the United National Congress does not support the tax”—which is consistent to what we have been saying all along—“the Corporation had made plans for the monies that were expected to be generated.”

You know why Madam Speaker? Because they told them that the panacea to the issues in local government was this property tax. So while we have been consistent at the regional corporation bodies through our chairmen, through our councillors, and here in the Parliament that we do not support the tax, they were fooling people outside there that the money collected from property tax will go into the regional corporations, when in truth and in fact, Madam Speaker, any revenue collected through property tax goes to the consolidated fund, it does not go to regional corporations.

The Member for Barataria/San Juan gave us an example earlier and I will not traverse that because that is very well much explained. But I want citizens to understand that when they come today and they tell you, they are moving it from 3

per cent to 2 per cent, as I have said, whether it is 3 per cent, 2 per cent or 1 per cent or no per cent Madam Speaker, it does not go directly—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: —to the regional corporations, it does not help you with fixing roads.

You know, I remember and again, reference to the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West just told us, he said: You know, people are interested in whether or not they will get water, or whether or not water trucks will be able to operate. I recall it was the Member for Princes Town, aided and abetted by the Member for St. Augustine, who raised that water trucking services, while there were swaths of the country that was without water for weeks and months, we said to the Member for San Fernando West: Will you increase the allocations for water trucking services?

People were suffering and still are suffering today in many parts of this country. Siparia, Princes Town, Oropouche East, Oropouche West, without basic supply because of geographic discrimination and when we asked—the Member for St. Augustine and myself stood up—the Member of the San Fernando West: Will you give additional funding, Madam Speaker? —Member was silent, absolutely not one word to say about that issue. But today, the Member for Lopinot/Bon West tells us: What? —that if they collect this tax, the property tax whether it is 3 per cent, 2 per cent whatever it is, it will go to regional corporations. And that is why coming out of this debate we make it abundantly clear to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, that none of that property tax will go to regional corporations, it is going to the consolidated fund. When it goes to the consolidated fund the Government then determines the disbursement and the allocations and where that money goes to.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West kept saying: Tell us, tell us where the \$14 billion will come from. Madam Speaker, this Government for the past nine going on 10 years, has records of very little or no foreign direct investment. It was under the People's Partnership that we saw the highest foreign direct investments in this country. And if you wanted to know where to make up that \$14 billion in terms of deficit, tell us—what were the projects that you have instituted, because COVID only came around at the end of 2019, you cannot use COVID for the rest of your life, for the rest of your political life as an excuse for why you have not performed.

And Madam Speaker, if Government had projects that were attracting foreign direct investment into the country today, COVID or no COVID, you would have been seeing the results of that. And therefore you would have been able, Madam Speaker, in terms of the \$14 billion deficit, you would have been able to say to the country, well, listen: This is what we have also been doing to fix the economy, this is also what we have been doing to generate income into the country. But all you do is complain, all you do is tax and borrow that has been your modus operandi for almost nine going on 10 years. Borrow and tax, borrow and tax, borrow and tax. Where is the foreign direct investment into the country?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: So let us just start there. Because we can tell you, we can tell you that when we were there—

Madam Speaker: Okay, so Member, I am not going to allow this debate to develop into a full debate on the economy and so. We have three very narrow clauses, okay, so that you have answered I will ask you to move on. Okay? This is not about the state of the economy, overseas direct investment anything like that at all, please.

Mr. B. Padarath: Yes, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, we are dealing specifically with the \$14 billion deficit that the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West spoke about in terms of the money that the property tax will seek to generate to put into the coffers of the Government. And therefore, what we are saying to the Government today is it cannot be that the imposition of the property tax is the only source or stream of revenue. And the Member for Diego Martin North/East and the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West hinged their contributions on that point, Madam Speaker. They hinged their contributions on that point. And therefore, while we are saying to them—because they have asked us you know, Madam Speaker. It was a question that was asked of the Opposition, in terms of this debate today, that while we are saying what our position is very clear—because we do understand that they are just about three or four clauses that are before us in terms of the Bill that is presented.

One of the most contentious being that it gives the Minister of Finance the power to make the regulations and so on. And Madam Speaker, it cannot be—and that is one of the most worrying situations when you look at this Bill. Because there are people inside of this Parliament, but also there is a population of \$1.4 billion—billion people sorry, who are concerned that should we give the Minister of Finance the power to make the regulations and not have to come back to the Parliament for oversight, that what you would see happen is post-general election, if the population takes God out of their thoughts and put back the PNM in, we could very well be seeing that post-general election, the Minister of Finance moves the 2 per cent that he seeks to pass today and bring it back to 3 per cent, 4 per cent, 5 per cent, 6 per cent, 10 per cent, 20 per cent. What stops the hon. Minister from doing that if this Parliament gives him the power by passing this Bill today, Madam Speaker?

5.40 p.m.

And that is why in the context of what Barataria/San Juan and the Member for Siparia have already said, that we do not trust, what this Government has to tell you. Their track record is there for all to see.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: This is the same Government who tells us on one hand, they will do A, and the other side of their mouths, they will do B, and then comes from the leadership all the way down, in terms of what is—this Government, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And therefore the regulations, it is a very worrying situation in terms of how the Government has sought to give this blanket sort of power to the Member of Diego Martin North/East, Minister of Finance. And therefore, when the Member rhetorically asked, the Member for Lopinot/Bon Air West, tell us where the money is going to come from, the \$14 billion? We can very well stand up in this Parliament, and tell you—but it is the regulations that give the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Finance, that power to do whatever he wants. Thereafter, this debate, Madam Speaker, is very worrying to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I want to turn your attention to a publication in 2014, and I know the Member for Siparia, she touched very lightly on this particular issue, but it was repeated by all Members on the Government side in terms of—

Madam Speaker: Member. Member for Princes Town, your original speaking time is now spent. You have 15 more minutes to wrap up your contribution, if you so wish to avail yourself of it.

Mr. B. Padarath: Yes, Madam, thank you.

Madam Speaker: You may proceed.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, all Members opposite who have spoken so far, have traversed on this issue of what the UNC's position was in 2014, and I want to turn your attention to a publication from the Ministry of Finance and the Economy, the national budget 2014, that was put out, and it says Madam Speaker:

“Clarifying The ‘Land and Building Tax’

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.”

He dealt with the issue of the land and building taxes, the timing in which in it supposed to happen. The valuations and the waiver, and I quote:

“In his Budget Speech on Monday 9th September 2013, the Minister said:

‘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 successful land and building tax is proper valuation of properties within a transparent framework. This will require the property rolls being brought up-to-date. I propose to 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 of by this Administration to suggest that is not a tax on property—it is to make it very clear that it is not the tax regime proposed by the...”—PNM—“Administration.”

That was put out, Madam Speaker, to make sure that there was the demarcation in terms of the difference between the property tax and the land and building tax being advocated by the then People's Partnership Administration.

Madam Speaker, I am not sure if we understand what we saw and what we

heard a few minutes ago, by the Member for Barataria/San Juan. But, the Member for Barataria/San Juan revealed some startling information in this House, Madam Speaker, and the Member was able to provide factual information, the Member was able to reference memorandums coming from the Ministry of Finance, the Valuations Division, and Madam Speaker, the Member for Barataria/San Juan, exposed, Madam Speaker, this Government, in terms of why we are really here today.

Madam Speaker, can you imagine how frightening it is to think that on a memorandum from the Valuations Division read by the Member for Barataria/San Juan, to hear what? That they gave authorization to officers to stand up on the road— you know in local parlance, we say to stand up on your gap, to stand up on the bridge—

Hon. Member: Curbside

Mr. B. Padarath:—and determine how many toilets you have, how many bathrooms you have, how many dog kennels you have. That is the power that was given to the Valuations Division by none other than, by the Member for Diego Martin North/East. And that is a memorandum that was read out in this House, reference, date, time, place, and who signed it, by the Member for Barataria/San Juan.

And the Member for Diego Martin North/East and others, must stand up in this House and tell us, because you are seeking to take away the parliamentary oversight by giving yourself the power and the regulations to determine whatever you want to do, but then we are hearing from inside the Valuations Department of the Ministry of Finance, that you gave the instructions to stand up on the outside if people are not home, on your bridge, on your gap, and determine “how much toilet and how much dog kennel” that you have.

5.45 p.m.

Madam Speaker, that is, in simplistic terms, so that people—because that is going to affect every strata of our society; every strata of our society, Madam Speaker. And instead of rolling out a comprehensive education programme—and that was something that was raised. The Minister promised every step of the way—when the Minister spoke about property tax inside of this Parliament or outside of this Parliament, one of the features—and it was raised always by the Opposition because many of us, we represent rural constituencies, rural areas, Madam Speaker. And the onus was on the Government, through the Ministry of Finance's Valuation Division, to roll-out an education campaign, and it was promised.

Today, what you have happening—and the Member for Barataria/San Juan stood in this House and he gave you one example, and we on this side can give you many examples because constituents have been coming to us. And, Madam Speaker, you know what we are giving you examples of? Where in households, where both husband and wife are receiving valuations for the exact same property, and the valuations are differing in terms of what is the annual rental value. How could that be, Madam Speaker? How could that be? But that is the track record and that is the trust that the Member for Diego Martin North/East wants us to place in him and his Government. And when we have examples like that across the length and breadth of our own constituencies, where you have people—where both husband and wife are receiving these valuations and requests to pay, we ask the Member for Diego Martin North/East, where was the education campaign? Where was the awareness campaign? What lengths did you take? Instead of utilizing the power that was given to you, instead, the Member decided that he will tell the Valuation Division to go and stand up if they are not home and determine how

much toilets and dog kennels they have. That is what is contained in the memos, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Imbert: Point of order, 48(6), imputing improper motives. I did no such thing. The Valuation Division is an independent body. The Commissioner is independent. I cannot tell them anything with respect to valuations.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Please continue.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, we will provide a copy of those memos to the Minister of Finance, and it is the responsibility of the Member—

Mr. Imbert: Madam Speaker, point of order, he said—48(6). He said, I gave those instructions. That is simply untrue. I gave no such instructions.

Dr. Rowley: And no such document exists.

Mr. Imbert: And no such document exists with me in it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: So, Member, I am sure you will deal with that in your wrapping up.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker—

Mr. Imbert: Bring the document.

Mr. Indarsingh: Continue.

Mr. Imbert: Bogus documents you say you have.

Dr. Moonilal: Please be quiet.

Mr. Indarsingh: Please.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, what I said was that the information provided by the Member for Barataria/San Juan suggests, Madam Speaker—and I am asking today, if the Member for Diego Martin North/East did not give the authorization, then who did? Because this is a classic case of what the Member told us in the last

debate where we had—

Mr. Imbert: Point of order, 48(6). He is continuously imputing that I, as Minister, gave those instructions.

Mr. B. Padarath: I said the Ministry of Finance.

Mr. Imbert: You did not.

Madam Speaker: No. No, no, no, no, no. So, Member, I am sitting here, I did not hear the “Ministry of Finance”. And that is why I told the Member, he could deal with it in winding up. You did not say, at least, what you intended to say. All right? So please do not try to—

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Okay. So, so—

Mr. B. Padarath: I withdraw—

Madam Speaker: One minute.

Mr. B. Padarath: I withdraw the comment.

Madam Speaker: One minute, please. Thank you very much. If that is not what you intended to say, but what you said, you are correct. Please withdraw it.

Mr. B. Padarath: Yes, Madam, I withdraw the comment and I replace it by saying the Ministry of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: The Ministry of Finance, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And therefore, we are calling on the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the Minister who heads the Ministry of Finance, to say whether or not—

Mr. Indarsingh: Clarify.

Mr. B. Padarath:—the Minister gave this directive, because the Ministry of

Finance cannot be providing documentation to their staff in the Valuation Division if they did not get the instruction from somewhere. This is the same Minister who told us, Madam Speaker, told the nation just a few days ago, who threw the blame on public servants and said, “Well, they put out the notices that were suspending the property tax.” This is the same Minister who stood up in this House today and told us that it was the social media who was telling people that the Government suspended the property tax. If the Minister was very clear and had a proper communications plan, then we would not have this sort of confusion we have in the country today.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Confusion reigns.

Mr. B. Padarath: But when you are making it up as you go along and you do not know because your handlers are telling you to move it from 3 per cent to 2 per cent, because you have a general election coming up, Madam Speaker, then the Minister must be very clear in terms of who gave the directive and why this was allowed to happen. Because, Madam Speaker, that encapsulates the collapse; the collapse that has brought us here today.

Mr. Indarsingh: The Government collapsed.

Mr. B. Padarath: The Government has pretty much collapsed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And that is why I say, Madam Speaker, that:

“The power of the people is...stronger than the people in power.”

Mr. Indarsingh: Yes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: And the people of Trinidad and Tobago, headed by the hon. Leader of the Opposition, must be congratulated, Madam Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—for taking this Government to task for not providing a clear, identifiable path and way forward. First, 3 per cent, now it is 2 per cent. You put him back there, meaning the people of Trinidad and Tobago, Madam Speaker, post general election 2025, and you could very well end up with 10 per cent—

Mr. Indarsingh: 10 per cent.

Mr. B. Padarath:—and that is the warning we are sounding to this population. Because they have told you time and time again, they will do A and they have shown you that they have done B, because they have wonton disregard for the people of this country, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: We are calling on this Government—we have made it very clear that the UNC has the plans the policies that we will utilize to ensure that the \$14 billion deficit that they speak about, that we have the plans, the policies to ensure that we are able to increase and create new revenue streams, Madam Speaker. And I think that is a point that has missed this entire debate from time and time again. Whether it is the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the Minister of Public Utilities, Lopinot/ Bon Air West, they have all said to us, revenue streams, we need new revenue streams.

Madam Speaker, we are the Opposition but they are the Government, and we have been telling them time and time again what they must do, but it was the Leader of Opposition who told them earlier, “Like stick break in your ears.” Because there are many things that you could do—even the population is pointing out different things that could be done. You have warned me not to traverse those areas. I could very well go into it but I will not, in honouring your ruling, Madam Speaker. But simply, what we are saying is that, to take this hardship, this burden

off of the backs of the people of Trinidad and Tobago—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—the backs that you continue to ride with the hope that they forget that you are telling them today, “Well, we easing yuh up.” This is no ease up, Madam Speaker. This is no ease up.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath: If you want to ease up the burden—

Mr. Indarsingh: Zero.

Mr. B. Padarath:—do not move it from 3 per cent to 2 per cent, move it from 3 per cent to 0 per cent. That is the ease up—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—that the Member for Siparia and others are advocating for on this side. Because this is coming at a time—you also must say, Madam Speaker, the Government that is, must also say—while we are hearing that they have not determined what they will do with the water and electricity rates, at the same time, when you are talking to the population today and you have the opportunity to say to them what the Government’s plans are, say very clearly that if you are reducing from 3 per cent to 2 per cent, what is going to be the increase for water and electricity.

Because what you will see happening is that if you reduce it to 2 per cent but you increase water and electricity by 10 and 15 per cent, that people out of their income—if you have an average income of \$4,000 a month and you increase water rates by 10 per cent, you increase electricity rates by 10 per cent, and you have a 2 per cent in property tax in effect, what you now have happening is 22 per cent across the board that is being deducted from your salary. That is the point, Madam Speaker. And the population is asking today, where do you want this residual

income to come from? So you are pauperizing the country—you are pauperizing the country with the hope that you will be able to meet that \$14billion deficit, but what you will continue to see happening because of that pauperization, Madam Speaker, you will continue to see the middle class shrinking, you will continue to see massive crime, massive unemployment. And if this country thinks that it could not get worse than what it is already today, Madam Speaker, we are in store for a hell of a ride if they are allowed to continue, whether it is 3 per cent—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. B. Padarath:—2 per cent, or 1 per cent because today we are very clear to them the Opposition supports zero per cent. Madam Speaker, I thank you. With those few words, I take my seat.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Diego Martin West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Prime Minister (Hon. Dr. Keith Rowley): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I crave your indulgence and apologize for my physical condition, which may restrict me in taking part in this debate, but I really felt that I could not have allowed this debate to be concluded and not be recorded among those who took part in the proceedings.

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, might I ask you to use the other mike? Yes, please.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Having come to join to the debate, I wish I would have been joining after someone else who would have said something that might have attracted, you know, a useful comment. But, Madam Speaker, I simply want to spend a few minutes ensuring that the population accepts that there is a difference between the Government and the Opposition.

I followed the debate from my bed earlier in the day and I was a little surprised to see the objections, but again, when you are in Opposition—a former Prime Minister, Patrick Manning, used to say, “They have to say something. They cannot just come here and say nothing, even if what they say contradicts what they have said before or does not make sense at all.” I understand that the Opposition has to say something, because I heard the Opposition Leader make the amazing objection that they were surprised to be called upon to take part in a debate on property tax because they needed time to do research.

Madam Speaker, the Member for Siparia came into government on a bandwagon of “Axe the tax”. That was the election campaign of 2010. It was the most, you know, effective and involved part of the 2010 campaign—

Hon. Member: *[Interruption]*

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I am not interested in coming to your palm—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister. Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Oh.

Madam Speaker: Okay, so—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Double Palm is for—*[Inaudible]*

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, I am hearing a running commentary that is disturbing me, if it is not disturbing anyone else. And I invite anyone who cannot comply with Standing Order 53—I have not said this for such a long time—to take a walk, compose themselves and come back when they feel they can do what they are supposed to do. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I was saying how surprised I was when I heard the contribution from the Leader of the Opposition who took

objection at the fact that the Opposition was not given adequate and extensive time to prepare, to do research to take part in a property tax debate.

6.00 p.m.

If there is one subject that the Opposition should be versed in and be able to speak even if they are awakened in the middle of the night is property tax, because they tasted government on an “axe the tax” campaign. The difference between the Opposition and Government since then and now is that, the Government will do what is in the population’s best interest, and the Opposition, the UNC, will pander to what they think the population will vote on.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: We have seen it time and time again where common sense decisions done in the public interest requiring leadership from the Opposition Members, mysteriously they will take a position which they believe is populism and also will serve them well.

So when we in the campaign of 2015, the PNM, said that we will, in fact, allow the return of the taxation on property at the end of the waiver, we are making it very clear what we will do as Government, and the population heard us. Not everybody agreed with us, but the majority agreed with us and voted us into Government, so we have a mandate, not once but twice, 2015 and 2020, to do this which is in best interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: What they have been huffing and puffing about is an attempt to pander to a narrative that says, the Government is going tax you so vote them out of office and put us into office. That is what it is all about and that is why you could have the Opposition Leader coming here today and making the most amazing explanation for a Minister of Finance who spoke on this issue in a budget

debate, and it was an issue which did not originate with them, you know, Madam Speaker. It was an issue that originated in the government that they defeated. I saw myself being featured in there by the Opposition Leader for 2009.

Madam Speaker, I want to remind members of the national community and my colleagues in this House, that in 2009 I was a Member of the Government, I was a government Backbencher and the Government was advancing this particular piece of legislation of 2009. From the Opposition Bench, I asked the government for clarification and the *Hansard* will show you, you know, Madam Speaker, that as a government Backbencher sitting over there [*Member indicates the seats of the Opposition*] I stood up to assist the Minister of Finance with the clarification, asking the then Minister of Finance to give way. My estranged colleague said, “No, I am not giving way to me, a Member of the Government.”

So, I do not know what they are talking about, clarification was sought, but better than that, Madam Speaker, as fate would have it, contrary to what you heard today in their attempt to stir up opposition and resentment to what is attached, nobody likes taxation, nobody likes to pay tax, but taxes are an essential part of the management of public business. So when the Opposition Leader sought for a crescendo today and asked, what has changed? I want to thank the Member for San Fernando West for his outstanding contribution.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Because, you know what has changed? That Member, one of the most enthusiastic and energetic in the Government was moved from Attorney General and Legal Affairs’ Office and put in the Ministry of Rural Development and Local Government because the Government was moving to bring about local government reform and his involvement in that legislation, his knowledge of it and his enthusiasm to effect local government reform saw him

being moved from that Ministry of the AG's Office into the local government office. You know how they took that? He was demoted. That is what they saw and started talking about, San Fernando West and seat because they are all about, seats, seats, seats, seats, seats—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—while we are in fact about government, government, government, people, people, people—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—and we are not afraid, Madam Speaker, to lead when there is a requirement to lead and to follow when there is a requirement to follow.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: That is why we in the PNM of the age that we are and the record of this country's history will show where the PNM stands. Madam Speaker, I was a boy in school when the calypso was, “The doctor say to pay as you earn”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: *Sparrow say, yuh paying to learn, but meh father say, he sharpening de axe, so when the collector come, he go cut up the income tax*". Madam Speaker, it was people just like them objecting to the PNM introducing income tax in this country where it was said that this PNM, this organization at its birth was saying, if each of us, if each of us—

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, Standing Order 48(1)—

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: A Standing Order?

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Speaker, 48(1). I just want you to know that we are allowing a history now.

Hon. Member: “A-A.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hinds: “Awww.”

Madam Speaker: Continue Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: As I said, Madam Speaker, when I started out, they have to say something even where it does not make sense. Madam Speaker, the point I am making is that once you attempt to implement policies, there will always be some people who will not be able to see the extent of your vision and exercise their right to object. This is what my colleagues are doing on the other side. They like to object and to lead their supporters to object. Fortunately, for the country, the majority of people in this country are decent, right-thinking people, sensible people who follow the Government [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Therefore, just as it was in the days of “the doctor say” and where the income tax was to be cut up, today, Madam Speaker, you have people in the Parliament after a long number of years, in fact, they spent five years in government and they used that five years in government not to advance a development of this nature, but to give a waiver and then to end the waiver on the way out of government in 2015. I want to point out to the national community all those who would have listened to them today, that when the UNC was leaving office in 2015, one of the last things they did was to end the waiver on property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Meaning that, immediately after it came into force and the tax would have been collected with no further involvement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So what they are doing here today is pure political hypocrisy and pandering.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Had they won the election the issue was decided by them already because they took the position in the Parliament that the waiver that existed in 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, ends on December 2015.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So when on the September 9, 2015 the Government changed, the Government met a decision that the Government of Trinidad and Tobago albeit a UNC Government which had taken the position that come January morning 2016 property tax is due and payable; hypocrites that they all are.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Hypocrisy is one thing, Madam Speaker, but to come here and make noise as if it is intellect. It is sound and fury signifying nothing. Well, imagine—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—the Member for Princes Town who took up a whole set of time here this evening trying to personalize this issue, as they always do, because they reduce everything to person, that the Minister of Finance could come after and raise the tax. Well, let me tell the Member for Princes Town something. Anybody in the post of Minister of Finance could come before the Parliament as the law permits and adjust the taxation here to any level, up or down. That is the power of the office of the Minister of Finance. When this Minister of Finance started out in office he reduced taxation on over 200,000 taxpayers by raising the zero taxation from \$60,000 to \$90,000 a year. That is what the Minister of Finance has the

authority to do.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The Minister of Finance also has the authority and he used it, he raised the taxation on banks from 25 to 30 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The Minister of Finance reduced the rate of VAT from 15 per cent to 12½ per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So to come here today and make a big song and dance that the Minister of Finance because it is Colm Imbert will raise it after—Madam Speaker, the people of this country are not stupid. The people of this country are not all of one ilk in a particular political party, and I do not know why they are banking all this investment, this political investment in trying to fool people.

The Government, Madam Speaker, the Government said at every stage, at every stage the Government said that we will reintroduce the collection of this tax law for good reason, Madam Speaker. We went ahead and we made a campaign, we just came from the polls last year, local government election where the whole question of local government reform was this Government's position. Of course they objected to that too thinking that it would have served them politically. We went to the polls. Nothing has changed. So they are always selling, they are picking a bad market because they believe that if they pander to what they believe people want, it will help them politically. We believe that if we put the public interest first we can explain to the people and people will know that we have done it in their best interest.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am sure that you could find a handful of people today who

still oppose income tax collection, but look at what the collection of income tax has done for this country. All of us who are earning anything the doctor had said then, if you put a little bit from each person's income you will raise a pool of money and you will use that pool of money to have a development programme. Madam Speaker, we were a colonial backwater without a development programme. Some of the biggest events that would have taken place in this country at that time was the opening of a standpipe. We could not build schools. We could not build roads. We could not build a hospital because we had no income. But with the coming of income tax, which was opposed then by some people gave us the light, because the PNM's vision to take a little bit, create a pool and use the pool of the Development Programme, moved us from that hopeless situation to one where the Government had a development programme which developed all of us including me, that is how I went to high school.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: How else do you think the Government funded free secondary education? By pandering to those who said no income tax?

Mr. Hinds: Box lunch.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The same thing is happening today. People have million-dollar houses, they want all kinds of services. They want the road fixed, they want the drain fixed, they want the mosquitoes killed, they want the fire service, they want the police service, but you do not want to pay anything, and I hear them talking about somebody in the Government who have—there is a big difference between having property abroad that you cannot hide from or would not hide from and having property abroad that you are hiding from. I have no doubt that there are people in this Government who may have property abroad, but the difference between us and them is that we do not have to hide anything we have.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: The Opposition Leader came here today and made a big announcement and I repeat it, “I have no property” as if that is a badge of honour. Madam Speaker, I have been a property owner since I was 17 years old.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: I am proud of that. I was paying a \$1.44 tax as a property owner because my grandfather took me to ETV Kelly’s office when I was in school uniform and gave me property, and I always knew that if I did not pay that \$1.44, I could lose that property. When it moved from \$1.44 to something substantial of over \$1,000, I knew it was because the value of the property had changed and I could not hold on to the 1948 valuation. So when some ex-MP come—

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: You do not know how important—

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, have some respect “nah” boy.

Madam Speaker: Member.

Mr. Ratiram: Madam Speaker, I rise on—

Madam Speaker: Okay. So could we all resume our decorum? Member for Couva North.

Mr. Ratiram: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1).

Hon. Members: “Awww”.

Hon. Member: Oh please.

Madam Speaker: So, Members, everybody is entitled to raise a Standing Order and the Speaker’s jurisdiction is to rule. Member of Diego Martin West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

6.15 p.m.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Yes, Madam Speaker, I think he succeeded in breaking my trend of thought. I was talking about a former MP making reference to the fact that he was paying \$200 and now he is going to be required to—

Mr. Imbert: To pay \$2,000.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Now, one can take that argument a little further and say, that \$200 was related to maybe an income of X, where X is well beyond whatever it is now. Because I knew, Madam Speaker, when that \$1.44 that I was paying on my property, you know how much old age pension was then, Madam Speaker? Because everything is relative. With the land and building tax there on that property of a \$1.44, old age pension was \$14, 1-4, \$14.

And, Madam Speaker, with the \$1.44, when my salary was \$169 a month, it was still \$1.44. Because there has been no review, as required by law, of those taxes, so anybody who is coming now and wanting to relate this tax to what was being paid on a valuation done in 1948 and 1975, just “making joke”. And then to get up and say that it is some big point that the Minister of Finance could change the tax next year or whatever. Madam Speaker, those on the other side who own property abroad would know that in most jurisdictions the tax is assessed every single year based on the state of the economy.

Mr. Imbert: Yes.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Every year. And they do not have to come to ask you anything.

Mr. Imbert: Here, take that.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Even here—I heard somebody talking about dog kennels and counting rooms; childish, gobbledygook, wasting Parliament time.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, when my tax moved from \$1.44 to, I think it was \$1,200, nobody ever asked me anything. Nobody ever knocked on my door. The valuation department did its work as an independent entity within the Ministry of Finance. Look how many times we had to intervene today to tell them the Minister of Finance does not direct the valuation department. So why are they trying to tell the public, “is Imbert who do it and Imbert say”.

There is a valuation department with professional staff who do not take valuation instruction from the Minister. Government engages in valuation with people acquiring property for all kinds of reasons all the time, the Minister of Finance dare not intervene in one of those valuations, and tell the valuation staff to give the man X dollars or Y dollars. So why does the Opposition always come here and try to mislead the population to keep them in blissful ignorance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: We try to educate our people as to the reason why, and that is why the Minister of Rural Development and Local Government could have come here today and give that exposé of local government reform and anchor it in this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And let me tell you who else is doing that, Madam Speaker. I crave your indulgence to read and quote copiously from the other arm of the UNC because the right hand does not seem to know what the land hand is doing, and the brown bottle does not know what the white bottle is drinking. Madam Speaker, let me quote for you from the Sunday—yesterday was Sunday, March 17th? Sunday, March 17th. “Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation chairman...”—this is a high functionary in the UNC, eh. My friend from Oropouche West knows that. Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, a young man who is

called, his name is Ryan Rampersad, one of our young politicians, eh. A Dareece Polo article, a senior reporter. Hear what Mr. Chairman of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation told the *Guardian*, “An opposition-controlled”—and I dare say controlled 100 per cent. I do not think the PNM has anybody in there.

“An opposition-controlled corporation is raising concerns over the Government’s decision to reduce property tax.”

Mr. Imbert: Imagine that.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So while they are in here making noise about property tax being reduced, one of their senior functionaries has a problem with the Government reducing it—and he goes on to say why:

“Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo...Chairman Ryan Rampersad commented in an interview with”—the—“*Guardian*...yesterday.

He was responding to Minister of Finance Colm Imbert’s announcement”—

Dr. Moonilal: Standing Order 55(1)(b). I know this is the Prime Minister, but the Member for San Fernando West—

Madam Speaker: Point—

Dr. Moonilal: The Prime Minister was not here, may not have known that he read from the same article—

Madam Speaker: Member, you have raised 55(1)(b)? Thank you very much. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: “He was responding to Minister of Finance Colm Imbert’s announcement that residential property tax would be reduced from three per cent to two per cent of the annual rental value...

Rampersad said while the...(UNC) does not support the tax...”—

Now, I think Rampersad is the UNC Chairman for Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo. He is UNC then, but the UNC does not support the tax.

“...the corporation had made plans for the monies that were expected to be generated.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. Hinds: What plans, 3 per cent?

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So while the parliamentarians are breathing flames like dragons in here, the local government practitioners at their leadership are making plans to budget for and to spend the 3 per cent.

Mr. Hinds: Yes.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And when they hear that the Government is not going to levy the tax at 3 per cent, and would reduce it by a third, he computed that to dollars and cents already, you know, and he said:

“We were...”—expecting—“to get...\$41 million...”—and that means we would be losing—“...\$13 million.”

Hon. Members: “Oooh.”

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

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And then he went on to tell you what effect that will have on them in the corporation:

“He said several projects will suffer as a result including a landslip prevention programme...”—buying equipment to clear our—
“...watercourses to...”—deal with—“flooding...”
—and at least to reduce the flood politics that they play.

Madam Speaker, I could tell you without fear of contradiction that while the people of Diego Martin West, through their MPs, have been supporting property tax, while we have been struggling to get to the point for today through the court

house by time and time again, nobody in Diego Martin has yet made a plan to spend that money. Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo has already made plans to spend it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So the people who have been supporting the programme all the way, the Mayor of Diego Martin, the new borough of Diego Martin, which is part of local government. When we said we are going to create a borough in Diego Martin and Siparia, they said they “doh want no Siparia borough”. The Mayor of Diego Martin is waiting at least for us to collect the money and stop counting “like in fowl bottom”.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. Member: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, he went on to say that:

“The instability in terms of what they are doing is badly affecting us because we can’t plan.”

You understand the extent to which they have hitched their wagon to local government reform and to the collection of property tax, and to put it to use to develop their community.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, he went further, he said, look at how this thing is doing us:

“When we...make promises to burgesses when we have public meetings and community meetings, we try to forecast what it is we can do in the year ahead and when we cannot deliver...it really puts a strain on us.”

So in fact, the collection of this local government income is taking a strain off local government practitioners and off local government, because we said if we are not allowed to collect that money, it puts a strain on us. So while the PNM is

trying to take a strain off the people of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo, their MPs in the Parliament “talking one set ah hooley”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: Out of touch.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, he said:

“...Rampersad said this announcement has now railroaded plans to finalise the CTTRC’s draft estimate tomorrow. He added that he remains sceptical about collecting any revenue from the tax...”

In other words, they are in the Parliament asking us to abolish any attempt, bring it to zero, and he is there crying, saying he is:

“...sceptical about collecting any revenue from the tax...”

Well, Mr. Rampersad could lie there, and rest assured that the PNM will support this Bill, the PNM will bring it into law, he will collect his tax, and he will develop the people of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And he is not the only one, you know. The Member for St. Augustine, she is quoted—my colleague there is quoted as saying:

“...opposition’s shadow...”

—Opposition’s shadow,—

“...Minister of Rural Development and Local Government, MP for St. Augustine Khadijah Ameen”—oh, that she is—“has reiterated the party’s position that it does not support property tax.”

So in other words, there is great divergence of views inside the UNC on this matter.

Madam Speaker, the left hand does not know what the right hand is doing, or they are just playing deceitful and hoping to get away with it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And I am quoting here, Madam Speaker, from the paper:

“She also said there has been a systemic undermining of local government as Government subventions continue to be slashed.”

That is an important statement. Here it is one of our colleagues is saying that allocations to local government continue to be slashed. She interprets that to mean an undermining, maybe deliberate undermining of local government. Madam Speaker, you know what it is? It is a situation where when in every budget, whether this Minister of Finance—

Madam Speaker: Prime Minister, your original time is now spent, you have 15 minutes, if you wish to complete.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Thank you, Madam Speaker. When the Minister of Finance passes the appropriation Bill in the Parliament with the support of the House, there are priorities, and clearly what our colleague from St. Augustine is saying, is that local government allocations tend to be low down on that priority list. Because clearly, Madam Speaker, you would know that one of the first calls as we realize revenue from the estimates, one of the first calls is the public debt. Right? Money you borrowed and spent already you have to pay it, otherwise there are serious consequences.

Then, of course, Madam Speaker, we have to pay public servants every month, that is another serious priority. So whatever money is in the kitty, public servant cheques have to be paid and honoured in the bank. Then, Madam Speaker, pensions. We have tens of thousands of pensioners who will not understand if their pension cheques are not issued or if their cheques are delayed or bounced. And then, Madam Speaker, we have the social services where there are people who are relying on the Government, huge numbers of tens of thousands of persons who

if they do not get that government cheque at the end of the month, they cannot put food on the table or they cannot support their indigent child, challenged in one way or the other.

Then, Madam Speaker, as you know, we have to find billions to spend on national security to prevent the murderers from killing all of us. National security, the police, they have to; the fire, we have to. And then, Madam Speaker, as long as it is a school term we want all our children to go out to school, and when they go there to meet their teachers waiting there on them to be able to teach them because they are our future.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And while we do all of that, Madam Speaker, if we feel a little dizzy about anything, does not mind that we have not been to the forum and we have not been drinking, our health comes first. We have to make sure that when the population needs health care, health care is a priority.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And after all of that, Madam Speaker, only then does the Development Programme of local government come into view. That is what it is. That is what the Member was saying. And in a budget, where for years, except the odd now and then, we are dealing with a deficit budget. The *Development Programme* as passed by the Parliament is at the mercy of the revenue collected in that year, in that month, in that week. So yes it is true, local government suffers from an absence of steady revenue stream, and, Madam Speaker, that is what this property tax is all about.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: It will revolutionize the delivery of services in the corporations, because when you have to wait to see if any money will come to you

from what is left of the *Development Programme*, what we are doing here is by law, and we said to our colleagues that this money that is going to be collected here, whatever the number is, is hypothecated for a particular purpose. It is identified in law for local government reform.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

6.30 p.m.

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So what is the problem? Why are our colleagues on this side having such great difficulty in supporting anything? One would have thought that they are so concerned about seats and they are so concerned about political power that this property tax will give authority and power to them, because they have as many corporations as the Government have. And you would think they will support it to bring relief and to bring development to the people in Tabaquite, in Oropouche, which vote for them all the time, but they have to have a reason to object, even if the objection does not make no sense. Telling you, do not do this, do not do that, do not borrow, do not raise the borrowing limit, do not do this. And then after all the “do not do, and do not do, and do not do”, not a single do that.

I have never heard them in the Parliament here one day saying, Madam Speaker, “Remove \$10 from Head A and put in on Head B” or “Move something from here and put it there,” and they are free to do that. All they do is object to everything and they think it is magic. Governing this country is not magic, it is competence and a belief in the trust that people put in you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Because if you want all the revenue streams dried up, what are you going to pay the bills to give what you want to give with? “Jumbie beads”? What are you going to pay it with, eh? We did not invent taxation. This is a tax which is levied all over the world because it is deemed to be reasonable. Coming

here and telling people that the valuation department should have gone to every single house, and talking nonsense about dog kennel and temple in the yard, the valuation department did not come to those positions then. Everybody knows it was done in a sampling basis. The court laid out—they went to court, you know. In order to block it, they went to court, you know, and the court guided the Government as what had to be done before the tax can be collected. We met with the requirements laid down by the court and that is why we are here.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: So to come here after and talk about—I do not want to be unkind and uncharitable to my colleagues, but you all are really wasting Parliament's time. That is what you are doing.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: You have the right to be heard but you also have the right to be reasonable and talk sense, because you are abusing the intelligence of people. Intelligent debate in the Parliament will do a lot to educate the population and change their behaviour, because a lot of people take positions based on what you all say, not knowing that you have misled them for political purposes.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: We are not afraid of being voted out for having done the right thing for this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk banging*]

Mr. Hinds: That is right!

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: And I make no bones about that, Madam Speaker, because we believe that as we do the right thing for this country, enough people will see that we have done the right thing for this country and will make sure we stay in government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: That is where we differ. They believe they have to pander to every nonsense and then the country becomes a place of “dotishness”. You have a \$1 million house and you are going and making common cause with a person with a \$100,000 house that we are being charged property tax. It is the same thing with the income tax. If you have a large salary, you pay a large amount to the kitty; 25 per cent of 25,000 is more cash than 25 per cent of 80,000. It is the same policy. You all should be ashamed of yourself.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley: Madam Speaker, I say no more on this. The PNM will support this. We will support it in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. We showed them, you know. In Tobago, where there is a revenue stream, the Tobago House of Assembly, after 40 years, has demonstrated that once you have a revenue stream, there is so much more that you can do. And they know that, because they normally point to Tobago and say, “Tobago is getting too much.” It is not that they are getting too much, they probably doing more with what they have because they have a revenue stream. All of us know if you have a salary, you can do more, you can borrow, you can take a mortgage and build a nice house and pay for it over time. But if you have no income stream, you cannot even pay a rent. Stop insulting the population of Trinidad and Tobago. Elections will be held when elections are due, and we will discuss elections with you then. Until now, this is time to levy the property tax, collect it—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Dr. K. Rowley:—and use it for the development of all our people, especially in Oropouche, in Couva South, in Caroni East, in Tabaquite, in Pointe-a-Pierre and especially in Siparia, where they rely on the PNM to come to their aid and supper.

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*): Thank very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to intervene. Madam Speaker, just for the record, the Prime Minister began his statement at 5.56 p.m. and ended at 6.35 p.m.; 35 and four, 39 minutes, I believe, he spoke for. And like me, at no time has he ever held up the amendment Bill in his hand to quote from any clause of the amendment Bill. I will try my best to replicate that because I think that was a very interesting technique of being able to speak for 39 minutes on a Bill without quoting from one clause. It is a skill, Madam Speaker, I am trying to really copy this afternoon.

Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister spoke—and I do have a couple of points to make on the statement by the Minister of Finance earlier, but I took copious notes, as I should, on the Prime Minister’s statement of 39 minutes. He began with the differences between the Government and Opposition, that we were complaining of no time to research; we pander to the electorate; when he spoke in 2009, local government reform; what the PNM stands for, their record; the right to object; the majority of people are right-thinking people; the UNC is—well I “doh” use words like that, but not thinking right, we are about political hypocrisy, pandering, so the Prime Minister believes; used the word “hypocrites”; “people of T&T not chupid”; the PNM Development Programme; free primary education; \$16 million homes; people have to hide—the difference is what?—some have to hide and some do not have to hide. And he went down memory lane, Madam Speaker. I was bowled over, really bewildered that the Prime Minister at one time was saying he earned \$169 a month, for a man who could well be earning \$80,000 a month

soon, and property tax was indeed a \$1.44. I never knew that.

Had it not been for this debate, I would never have known that, 23 years in Parliament. Then, of course—the Prime Minister would not have troubled himself to leave his bed—in the beginning of his statement, he was a bit inaudible and I think it is because his voice is not well. But this statement was properly called, and I say with respect, the “Rowley/Ryan statement”. Because I believe if the Member for—if the Chairman of Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo did not have a statement in the *Express* yesterday—

Madam Speaker: So just remember—

Dr. R. Moonilal:—the Prime Minister would not have spoken.

Madam Speaker: Member, just remember, and you are senior enough, when we are referring to each other in here, we do it in a particular way.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Thank you very much, Ma'am.

Madam Speaker: Yes.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Taken.

And as I continue, public servants have to be paid—and, of course, this is why property tax, according to the Prime Minister, needs to be introduced—national security; we need police; we need fire; we need money for health care; the Development Programme—and, of course, praise the Member for San Fernando West for talking about local government and implementing reform and so on—and the Government is competent. And then the Prime Minister allowed himself to make a statement that we are wasting parliamentary time and we were not talking sense and misleading; again, the word “dotishness”, “you should be ashamed of yourself”—not you, Madam Speaker, but I thought he meant those here, opposite. And you know, Madam Speaker, I could not help but feel that on Sunday to come, Sunday coming, Professor Selwyn Ryan might have part two—

Hon. Members: Cudjoe.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Prof. Selwyn Cudjoe, forgive me. Prof. Selwyn Cudjoe may have part two of:

“Dr. Rowley’s public vulgarity”—which was his article of Sunday, yesterday.

A fascinating article, which I would not quote and put on record but I did read beginning to end.

Madam Speaker, to pick up on a few points—because I personally was happy to hear the Prime Minister deviate like this because I thought they were important issues as well. Madam Speaker, at no time has the UNC Opposition used property tax in a manner to pander, to butter up, to induce, to seduce the population of Trinidad and Tobago into anything. The Prime Minister, if you hear him today, you would not believe that he led a party to defeat in Tobago and then was defeated in local government in Trinidad.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Ameen: Yes, yes.

Dr. R. Moonilal: You would not believe that. You would not believe that. In fact, I think where we agree is when the Prime Minister says, the Member for Diego Martin West, that Trinidad and Tobago has right-thinking citizens, and that reflected itself in the THA election and local government election.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: It reflected itself. Madam Speaker, the point about the history of taxation, we are all familiar with British political and economic history and the evolution of taxation system. In a nutshell, land belonged to the Crown, to the King, to the monarch and, of course, they took a tax of the land because it was in the name of the sovereign. So they taxed the commoners, the ordinary people.

That evolved decades and centuries later into a taxation system that a government derives revenue from taxation as one area of financing its activities.

[MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

There are other areas as well, investment, royalties on minerals, rents and so on, and so on.

Ms. Ameen: Rents?

Dr. R. Moonilal: Governments—well, in the energy sector, they call it “rents”, you know. You have several revenue streams but a key area is taxation. So the Prime Minister says they need the taxation and so on. And I just want to clarify something, because this evening the entire Government, I believe—several speakers were quoting one Ryan Rampersad. Now, if Ryan Rampersad comes in this Parliament here, none of them will know what he looks like. Let me begin with that. In fact, he could be sitting here and you do not know. But they jump up at something, you know, like I say, with love. Because we keep a lot of pets and sometimes one of the pets named “Louis”, he grabs a squeaky toy and he will not give it up at all. No matter how much it irritates you and how much it annoys you, they will not give up a squeaky toy and today, Members of the Government are with a squeaky toy. That is what they are with. And they will not give it up no matter how much they annoy us, because they think that Ryan Rampersad is saying something that they like.

So both—two speakers—and I tried to raise it as well but so be it—raised this issue. Ryan Rampersad made a statement. He said, “Look, we do not support no property tax at all.” But you say you are passing it and based on that we say, “Okay, X amount, we will provide for this, for backhoe, for tractor, for truck, for cleaning river, for thing,” based upon what you promised.

Hon. Member: They did their homework.

Dr. R. Moonilal: They did their homework, others did not do their homework and they said, “We do not support this, our party does not support this.” And I have a statement here from the Mayor of Chaguanas, Faaq Mohammed, dated today:

“Opposition Against Property Tax: A Call for Fairness and Justice”

The Chaguanas Borough Corporation.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah, I put it down now. The Chaguanas Borough Corporation is saying, “Look, we do not support this”—the Mayor, the Alderman and the entire corporation. Why you do not read this into the record? Should I read the whole thing now?

Ms. Ameen: Yes. “Start up, start up”.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Maybe I should. With your permission, as the Prime Minister wanted to read Ryan Rampersad statement, I also wish to put on the record the statement by the Office of His Worship, the Mayor of Chaguanas, Faaq Mohammed.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Just for the record, is it the *Express* you said?

Dr. R. Moonilal: No, this was issued today, a media release.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Oh, a media release.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Issued today, 18th, 2024. And it says:

“Today, I address you not only as a concerned citizen but also as the Mayor of Chaguanas, along with nine other members of my council. Together, we stand united in our opposition to the proposed property tax in Trinidad and Tobago. We firmly support the United National Congress (UNC) and its leader, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar...”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:

“...in their resolute stance to axe this unjust tax.

Whether it is set at 2% or 3%, the property tax is an oppressive measure that we cannot, in good conscience, support. As leaders representing our community, we see firsthand the struggles faced by our citizens. Crime rates are soaring, unemployment is rampant, and families are fighting to survive on meager earnings.”

Well said, I believe, Mr. Mayor.

“In such dire circumstances, imposing additional financial burdens on our people is simply unconscionable....”—says the Mayor.

“As the Mayor of Chaguanas and alongside my council members...”

And I believe there are PNM council members there too.

Ms. Ameen: Yes.

Dr. R. Moonilal: What? PNM council members said this?

Ms. Ameen: All nine.

Dr. R. Moonilal: All nine? What? We were not talking about the left hand and the right foot a few minutes ago. PNM councillors agree in Chaguanas, all nine. We agree with the United National Congress.

“...we support the United National Congress and the leader of the opposition, Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar’s position on the property tax, and that is to axe the tax.”

6.45 p.m.

This is from nine council members of the Chaguanas Borough Corporation including UNC and PNM councillors. Let me continue:

“We stand with the people of our community and the nation at large...Furthermore, let us dispel the myth that this tax would benefit

corporations. The revenue collected from the property tax does not directly benefit corporations; instead, it flows into the consolidated fund. Any suggestion that this tax serves the interests of corporations is nothing but a hoax, and it is essential to set the record straight.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Where is Diego Martin West? He went back to bed.

“In conclusion, I urge our policymakers to listen to the voices of the people and reconsider the implementation of the property tax. Let us prioritize the well-being of our citizens and work towards policies that genuinely uplift and support them. The UNC and Mrs. Kamla Persad-Bissessar have our full support in their fight against this unjust tax, and together, we will continue to advocate for a fair and equitable future for all.”

Media Release Mayor of Chaguanas on behalf of the Chaguanas Borough Corporation and I just want to say this again:

“I address you not only as a concerned citizen but also as the Mayor...along with nine other members of my council.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Now—but they come here and hold on to the squeaky toy, make noise right through, from beginning to end making noise. Do not want to let it go at all. Not even if you put food, “dey does rob that from yuh mouth”. And telling us about what Ryan Rampersad—Ryan Rampersad made the point, I say again, that listen we do not support no property tax but having said that you promised to implement it. You promised to get X millions of dollars available. Therefore, we are in our right to plan.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: What is wrong with that? What sin he committed there?

Hon. Members: None.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Correct. So let me leave that and move on. So I think the political leader of the PNM needs to speak to his Members in Chaguanas. This cheer, and clap and support they give to the Opposition Leader is welcomed. We welcome that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the issue the Prime Minister raised as well with our position, this may appear to be a simple amendment of three clauses and so on, but these are very serious matters requiring research, requiring study, requiring data. When you change taxations on property tax from 3 per cent to 2 per cent that requires some understanding and data. So when you bring it for us on Friday—did they bring it Friday? They bring it Friday and tell us come Monday, we debating that. So what we doing Saturday and Sunday? Where “yuh” doing the analysis? On Harpe Place? You do not get the chance because you know, in this debate so far and I will come back to the Prime Minister’s foolishness in a little while. To this point, so far, the Member for—okay.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Just—

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I withdraw that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I think how you coined it, yes.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Prime Minister was allowed to use a word, which I am sure in fairness I will be allowed to.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No, no. You see again.

Dr. R. Moonilal: The “dotishness”.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No again.

Dr. R. Moonilal: So he can say that but I cannot say it?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Okay.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hold on. Right, again let us put it in context. Fair enough? And I think you know pretty well.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Okay well, okay we will talk about that somewhere else. I will raise that matter on the platform Mr. Deputy Speaker, so that is fine.

The matter I want to raise now is that the Minister of Finance spoke and at no time did he explained fully or even partially, from 3 per cent to 2 per cent. Why? What you do, you pull that from a cereal box? It was pick-a-pan and that is the booby prize? Where you get that from? “What drive that”? The Member for Lopinot/Bon Air, I believe, said he was walking on the ground and listening to people and so on. So the people come up to you and say Mr. Minister of Public Utilities, you know we cannot pay 3 per cent, but 2 per cent is good. Give us 2 per cent.

Where you get that from? There must be an explanation? How much money do you expect at 3 per cent? How much you expect at 2 per cent? What is the impact on your budgetary requirements and your revenue stream and so on? But if we continue to talk like that, they might accuse us to of supporting. But they pull this figure from a hat. They are backing down on the property tax, they have been defeated by the UNC and the people on the property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: They are defeated. So they come now to back-back, to back down, to step down, to climb down but they want to save a little face.

They do not want to say, “well, it doh have no property tax” because we support that, so we will say not 3 per cent, 2 per cent. To this day, we have no explanation and they do not have an explanation either. They make amendments here to change things because of the chaos in the country.

6.50 p.m.

My friend from Barataria/San Juan is fasting these days so there are certain things he could not say but, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I have not started fasting yet and I could say it. This Government is like someone who goes into the shower, “take off all dey clothes and open the shower” and then they discover “it have no soap and dey run back outside, unpleasant as it may be looking for soap”. This is how they pass law. They just turn on the shower, realize that they have no soap, no towel and “they fly back outside”. This is their legislative approach so they have to come back and fix. And a colleague on this side said it. Next six months, “yuh coming back with ah next amendment”. Trust me, you are coming with “ah next amendment” next six months because “dais the towel yuh forget next time”.

Mr. Ratiram: “Wasting money and they are desperate.”

Dr. R. Moonilal: And they will become more and more desperate. They have been defeated on the property tax and no amount of jumping up and jumping up and squeaky toys and things will change that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: The Mayor of Chaguanas explained that this thing is not just for local government, it is not local government at all and then the Prime Minister accusing of what?—political hypocrisy and so on. “We raising this thing because we want tuh geh vote”. “We geh vote without this.” They are doing a good job bringing down themselves. We do not need to push them, we do not need to throw them over the cliff, they are doing it themselves.

And this evening, another major issue arose, the Prime Minister raising this issue, who owns property and who does not own property and so on. Members on this side—and I imagine your side too—declared to the Integrity Commission and the Integrity Commission can investigate anything they want. They tried to

investigate and I think the Chairman lost “he neck” the other day when he tried to investigate something. “They chop him out.”

Ms. Ameen: Dangerous.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Dangerous but all of us on this side and many of us who are more senior have been declaring to the Integrity Commission for years, we know how to do that. The Prime Minister declares to the Integrity Commission. He has a timeshare in some place in Las Vegas. MP from Princes Town brought the matter to the public. There is a Form B declaration from the Prime Minister suggesting—yeah, I have it here, Form B is to the public.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hon. Member, remember you take ownership for clearly anything that you have been saying.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Sure, yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No problem.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Thank you but I do not take ownership for the house but I take ownership of saying it. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Prime Minister declares on his Form B here, “Timeshare Las Vegas”. Whatever happens in Vegas stays in Vegas but nothing is wrong. I have no grouse against the Member for Diego Martin West having this timeshare in Las Vegas, One Woodbrook Place, Mason Hall, Goodwood Ridge somewhere, La Horquetta Villas, Shirvan - Inez Development. I have no problem here. He has it, he declares it. So what you have a problem with people on this side who have property, whether the property is in Trinidad, Miami or New York or whatever? They declare it. If you think somebody is doing something wrong, you report it. You report it to the Integrity Commission or police if you think it is fraud or something but saying that we have properties abroad and pay taxes here but do not want to pay here.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will tell you something. When we hear the plight of

our supporters, our members or the members of the national community, citizens, members of the PNM, when we hear their plight, we come here and we give expression. We vocalize that plight. It is not ourselves, we are not pursuing our own interest here necessarily, not at all.

I have in my hand and I would not demonstrate, I would not show the picture and so on but it was on the social media so I imagine many people saw it. A gentleman in San Fernando holding up his assessment and it is says here:

“Steve Khan stands in front of his Panco Lane, San Fernando home with his property tax valuation notice. Khan’s home has been assessed to have an annual rental value (ARV) of \$96,264.”

Now this, I will not show it but I will describe it. It is an old wooden house that appears to be built in the 70s or maybe the 60s with those—you know those long-time windows with putty right around the window and so on, and the door is these long-time glass with marble. When you look through, “yuh cyah see nothing” but you could see a shadow, frosted or something like that. And it is a wooden house on a few sticks there. Now, who is paying \$8,000 a month rental there for that? First to begin, I am not sure anybody would rent it, with great respect but if you rent that, you pay \$500 a month or \$600 a month or something, you know. The man has an assessment for \$96,264. I mean and with great respect, I am sure it is a warm home and comfortable and so on for the gentleman. The gentleman incidentally looks in his 60s, 70s and so on, so I am sure he enjoys his property.

But this is the problem we face in the society where many persons like Mr. Khan and others have gotten valuations and assessments and so on that are ridiculous. We are taking up an issue in Palmiste—I will not call names or street or anything—where two properties just next to each other, one valued at more or less \$60,000 annual rental value, the next one is \$150,000. They are next to each

other. What is that about? And to add injury to insult, the person who has the home, which is \$150,000, \$160,000 value, is a retired person on a fixed income of pension, a certain percentage of their wage, their salary, expected to now pay every year, you divide \$170,000 by 12 as the case may be, take away the 10 per cent and look for your 3 per cent of that. A lot of money. Three months pension I calculated when I got the documents. Three months pension goes into property tax. Could you imagine that? And the Prime Minister comes and says we are raising “all this thing” for politics; we are raising this for politics while Mr. Khan is here in front of his house. So what is he doing now? He is a politician too? He is politics too?

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Dr. R. Moonilal: “Buh I never see him in the House.” I never saw him here. I never saw him on this side or that side. So he is playing politics then? This is reality and we represent people like this.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, other speakers on the other side are making this point about we have to finance development and national security and all—how this country was governed for all these years without property tax at 3 per cent, annual rental value minus 10 per cent as the case may be? “How we used to pay police and fire and social welfare and pension and public assistance?” How, how? The money dropped from Mars? You know how? Because the country made money because the economy was buoyant.

Hon. Members: *[Desk thumping]*

Dr. R. Moonilal: When we were in power, 2010 to 2015, the economy was buoyant. People had jobs, they had income, meaning they paid tax. The energy sector took off, booming. We had an oil industry at that time. NGC gave the Government between 2010 and 2015, \$20 billion in revenue from NGC. They like

to talk a lot about the energy sector because in the next election, they believe that one of their strengths, their belief, is something calling energy propaganda and that is what they are coming with. It is energy propaganda. Everything collapsed in the energy sector but they somehow did a good job. “Dais like, you know, ah building falling down” and the building falls down but they say listen, “the building fall down buh we did ah good job eh”. It did not fall down over the road, it just fell down on the side where it was located. That is how they are managing the affairs of this country.

The Prime Minister, if he was here because he is not well clearly, I would have told him he does not know the difference between his ankle and his elbow.

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Dr. R. Moonilal: I could say that. Could I?

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Dr. R. Moonilal: “Ah safe?”

Hon. Member: Yeah.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Thanks. He does not know the difference between his ankle and his elbow. “He just come how he is, something happen and he run outta de bed”, came today to make a speech because he heard the Member for Siparia and he could not sleep presumably.

Hon. Members: *[Interruption and laughter]*

Dr. R. Moonilal: So the Member for Siparia has that effect I imagine. So he rushed out to make points and politics and not once telling us about the Bill. What is 3 per cent as opposed to 2 per cent? What are all these matters concerning the way they conduct the valuation, the assessment? The staffing at the different places. Look at the point of staffing that you put a system in place where you cannot get the qualified people to implement, to execute and then stands up today,

the Prime Minister, the audacity, the vulgarity of calling people “dotish” and “shameless” and “wasting time” and so on. This is the Prime Minister of the country in case people do not remember, this is the Prime Minister. This is the Prime Minister.

I want to remind the Government that when we did not have property tax—and I am coming to an important point now on this property tax matter and I think it is only myself qualified to make the point with respect to everybody because I was there. We had no property tax, built 100 schools, nine police stations. When they were beating their chest opening the St. Joseph Police Station, Besson Street and one more, we started construction of those things.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: We started construction of Point Fortin Hospital, Arima hospital, built the Couva Children’s Hospital, the San Fernando Teaching Hospital. I could continue.

Hon. Member: Health centres.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Health centres, bridges, roads. They built the San Fernando to Point Fortin highway in four pieces, you could run off the road by Debe.

Mr. Ratiram: They built the “Mosquito Crack”.

Dr. R. Moonilal: You have the “Mosquito Crack”, they are famous for that now. But the point I am making is that we did that without property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, I want to make a point that I think I alone could make at this point in the Chamber. I sat every single week in a committee called the Legislative Review Committee, committee of Government, the Chairman was the then Minister of Legal Affairs, the hon. Prakash Ramadhar; a key driver of that Committee was Attorney General the hon. Anand Ramlogan. I

sat on that Committee every week and every time this matter of property tax came up, I can tell you the Government's intention of the Partnership was always to repeal this property tax, always to repeal but it was a legal process.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the PNM left people in the Ministry of Finance who made it a living hell, a nightmare to repeal that property tax. I will not call the person's name but I know the name. Member for Couva South knows the name, he was Minister in the Ministry of Finance. The person held an important position and came every week and explained to Mr. Ramlogan, Mr. Ramadhar, how we could do that and we were breaking the law and if you try to do that, you undo the law and if we try to repeal the property tax, the universe will lose its shape. The earth and the other planets will be out of alignment. That is what we had to hear every week.

Hon. Member: *[Interruption]*

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yes, they left their people to do that, they left them and every week when we came and we said no, it is the intention of the Government to repeal, and repeal, and repeal, kept saying that, we got "advice" that this cannot be done.

Our intention was to go back I believe, to the land and building tax, whatever that was because that appeared to be working. From land and building taxes, I think we would receive every year, unless I am mistaken, \$173 million more or less from land and building taxes. Our intention to go back. You know the person told the review committee of which I was a member, that if we go back to the land and building tax, we break the law too and you cannot do that. So we cannot go forward and we cannot go backward and that went through a series of events with legal opinion and senior counsel and junior counsel and everybody, everybody went through that.

When the time came, 2014 or thereabout, we said hold on—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, you just have approximately two more minutes of your initial speaking time. You have an additional 15. Care to avail?

Dr. R. Moonilal: Please.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Proceed.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Appreciate that very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Member: [*Interruption*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah, I remember that. So we had to go and test opinions, legal opinions from Trinidad, England, wherever it was to understand how to do this in law properly. When the time came, we said listen, listen, just waive taxes now from 2010 to 2015. So the position we took was that no citizen of Trinidad and Tobago under the People's Partnership ever paid property tax in this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: We can stand and say proudly that under a United National Congress Government of Mr. Panday at that time, People's Partnership under the Member for Siparia, not a single citizen in this country paid something called a property tax of 3 per cent, never. And we took the law because we could have done that easily to waive property tax which we did. Of course, you waive it not forever. The Prime Minister makes the point as if we should have waived it from now "til ohee-oho". So, forever we waive. You do not do that. There is an election coming in 2015, that was not a snap election, that was due. You allow another administration, it could be our administration or another administration as it turns out, to decide what they want to do, and if they decide to waive the property tax, they do it. It is the same thing we heard from Port of Spain North/St Ann's West. He is out of the country again. I think he is fighting with people in the airport to use immigration.

7.05 p.m.

But the point I make is that they said we did not negotiate gas contracts and so on. They were not due at that time and that year was an election year. You allow another administration and certainly another Minister—Ministers do change even in the same administration—you allow them to do their work at the right time. But they harped today, they continue, we did not negotiate this. It was not due at that time, it was not. And what we had there, we were putting an incentive programme in place to incentivize the energy sector, the gas sector in particular. That is what we did. We have a proud track record in the energy sector that you will hear a lot about.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: We have a proud record in construction and infrastructure. Prime Minister today said, he needs property tax because he has to deliver health care. He needs property tax to deliver health care. Nine years later, we need property tax for healthcare. And we are very clear with the time frames they are giving, nothing will happen here for at least six months, nine months, 12 months, whenever, because they have now extended—and you know what is a next interesting point that came up in this issue, but not yet in the debate I think, but certainly in the issue? This Government would have paid what we calculated—and we stopped counting, eh because some of us do not count something forever. They would have paid over \$60 million in public relations communications ads to promote property tax over the years.

The Minister announced that since the property tax came in, they collected \$1 million; spent \$60 million-plus to promote it and collected one. And the one, I think they have to return it now. They have to return it because they are going to change the system and I think they are returning money now. So they have to find

a process that all the people who paid, you have to get back your money because they reassessed this thing, and you pay again, or something like that that, or you give credit. I do not know what they will do. But they spent \$60 million-plus to promote it and collect \$1 million. And that is the story of property tax.

Hon. Member: PNM maths.

Dr. R. Moonilal: That is their mathematics, that is how they operate, by just squandermania in everything they do. I mean, nothing is cheap, nothing at all. So introducing property tax cost over \$60 million, you collect \$1 million in property tax, you have to return money now from the little bit you collected, and nobody will tell us how much they spent to promote property tax over nine years, which was their policy, and they spent a lot to promote it. You remember there were all kinds of conferences, and seminars, and public awareness, and every time they want to correct something in the public domain, if a blogger put something out 12 o'clock in the night, the next day, they get a full-page ad in the newspaper? They did all of that, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and today they have to come and make a U-turn. They make a complete U-turn on property tax because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they just decided that this thing so unpopular and has electoral repercussions, that it is best they do not do that now.

And my colleague was correct, if God forbid and the people return them to office, they are not coming back with 2 per cent, they are coming back with 10 per cent. And they will come with a next cock and bull story about the economy and say, "Well, 10 per cent is better now, we need that." That is their history. So, I mean, we are not, you know, taken aback by that. But, Mr. Deputy Speaker, property tax—and I beg to disagree with the Prime Minister on this matter. The payment of property tax will not solve crime, national security—Prime Minister "make out" a case today as if you pay property tax, crime will go down.

Hon. Member: Yeah, 11 people died over the weekend.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Eleven persons died over the weekend. That is not going to stop because people pay property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Indarsingh: Leadership.

Dr. R. Moonilal: That stops when you have proper leadership in national security in the Government. And that affects the TTPS because, Mr. Deputy Speaker, they have reached a stage now where—I mean, do not know how else to put it—they are living in the sky. They are out of touch with reality. The Government is into hiding. The Government is into hiding. They are living in the sky, they cannot go on the ground to see people, not even in a situation of mass murder, Mr. Deputy Speaker. They are hiding from the people and they expect that if you pay 2 per cent property tax—

Mr. Imbert: Point of order, 48(1). This Bill has four clauses—[*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Oh, you now know this?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. Please, Members, please

Mr. Imbert: It deals with the reduction of tax and the extension of tax. None “ah dem thing he talking about”, 48(1).

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, so, Member, tie in your point quickly and bring it back to the particular Bill.

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Just tie in your point quickly, MP for Oropouche East.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Thank you. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, as usual—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, address the Chair.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yeah, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as usual, through you, I have good regard for the gentleman from Diego Martin North/East, because he is inviting me to look at the Bill, which he could not invite his Prime Minister to do. But he understands that maybe I will shed some wisdom for him—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—because he would not get it from Diego Martin West.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: So, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—I want to assure the gentleman that—I want to assure the gentlemen, with great respect to the gentleman from Diego Martin North/East, we have no respect for him. We have no trust in him, and I say that with affection. We just do not trust him. So—

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: We do not trust him and we do not respect him, and I say that with respect.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And we cannot leave the Member—yeah, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we cannot leave this important matter of orders in the hands of the Minister of Finance dealing with property tax. We cannot return—we cannot move to negative resolution as opposed to affirmative resolution, effectively leaving it in the hands of this Minister of Finance, which the Bill is now calling on the House to approve. The Minister gets certain powers to make orders and, of course, we revert—I use the word “revert”—to negative resolution as opposed to affirmative resolution. Because the history is there, that any slightest bit of power comes their way, they

will abuse. They will trample on the rights of citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, this Minister—[*Laughter*—there is a court judgment where this Minister's name is called in, which the constitutional rights of public officers have been infringed. And regrettable, the Member for Diego Martin North/East found his name in the judgment, on the wrong side of the ruling. So—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Member, again, please.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Sure.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Yes, again, Member, please, let us move on accordingly. Let us move on.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Yes. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in fact, he knows what I am talking about, so I will leave it there. Mr. Deputy Speaker, the tax, in no way, as they are conceiving now, will promote equity in this society—

Mr. Imbert: [*Inaudible*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: You see—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Silence, please.

Dr. R. Moonilal: He is troubling me.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the tax as conceived now is ill-conceived. And it will not add equity, it would not bring fairness and justice in terms of the payment by persons. I am telling the Minister that the position on this side is clear. Ryan Rampersad or no Ryan Rampersad, it is clear. We do not support the property tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: It must be repealed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And if they had not left their PNM people in office there, we would have done that, but that is another story. And it must be repealed. Because as it is, whether it is 2 per cent or 3 per cent, it really makes no fundamental change in terms of the inequality. Because there is a famous saying, you know, Mr. Deputy Speaker, “If you treat everybody the same way and they begin by being unequal, then you promote inequality.” I do not know if that makes sense to many people. I will get some visual aids next time I have to explain that to them.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: But if people are unequal and you treat them equally, you promote inequality. And whether it is 3 per cent or 2 per cent, it is the same principle; it is the same principle. The person who is suffering now, whose name I called, and many others—I just do not want to read out everybody’s name—it will cause the same problem. All you are doing is you are tinkering with it because you think your backs are against the wall, politically. And because your backs are against the wall, politically, you come to show—because I picked up the narrative of the Government early o’clock, “We listen to you, we understand, we care, umm, well yes.” So, you only listen now, you did not hear that eight years ago, nine years ago? People were saying the same thing. You listen now because you are within one year of an election, that is why you are listening now, so that they are doing this with a certain purpose and the equity issue continues. That equity issue will continue regardless of the amendments.

The issue of local government corporations—well, I hope that the Mayor Faaq Mohammed, with the support of UNC and PNM councillors, has stated very well that position there.

The other smaller matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I just wish to signal—and I

mean, other colleagues may wish to take it up—is that the Board of Inland Revenue—and I just want to say the Board of Inland Revenue, as we all know, is independent of the Minister of Finance but falls under the Ministry of Finance. And there has been a lingering issue with the Board of Inland Revenue accounting to the Auditor General. And we have the records on that, where there is some matter, a legal issue really, as to whether or not the Board of Inland Revenue can surrender information, as state enterprises do, to the Auditor General, so that the Auditor General can do its work. And that matter has gone for legal opinion many years now. Unless I am mistaken, eight years.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Again, Member, move on, please. Move on to another point.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Board of Inland Revenue is central to the property tax.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: But you are on a totally different point with regard to what we are debating. Proceed.

Dr. R. Moonilal: Okay. Mr. Deputy Speaker, I will just say that we cannot depend on a Board of Inland Revenue as well, that is now unaccountable to the Auditor General. And the Minister of Finance is in charge of that Ministry. He—quite rightly, they will claim he has no power over that and so on, but that is an untenable position when you have these types of issues of management of property tax, of payment, of—as we indicated earlier—inheritance taxes, where you transfer tax one generation to another because the first generation did not pay. And you have an organization that is managing that, that is unaccountable to the Auditor General. I will not say much more about that because I do not want to stretch the debate too far.

So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, in winding up, I really stood to respond to the

Prime Minister's wide-ranging assessment of this matter. Regrettably, he could not stay with us, but we wish him a speedy recovery and to indicate that we are very firm and clear. We represent, at this time, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for the public record—the Opposition represents—by the last test, we represent the majority of voting citizens, of citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: We represent the majority by the last test. So until another test comes and the result is different, we are representing the majority.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: When I looked at my friends opposite, they are the Opposition in waiting.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: And I do not think they will do a good job by the way. Many of them would not be there. I am sorry to say for San Fernando West, he was praised by the Prime Minister who looking for a next candidate for San Fernando West. So, Mr. Deputy Speaker, the Prime Minister—well, I do not want to comment on his Development Programme and all these type of things. I think that should be put to rest, but to say other colleagues would continue this important discussion and we will, of course, continue—on the public platform, we will continue on the public platform to articulate and advocate against the property tax and whatever they resolve here. Thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Ameen: I had turned on my mike.

Mrs. Robinson-Regis: “Yuh late”.

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

Ms. Ameen: But, of course, you do. Go ahead.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Because I caught his eye before you.

Ms. Ameen: If I had stood up, maybe.

Hon. C. Imbert: You did not.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, let me see if I can respond to some of the more outlandish statements made.

Mr. Tancoo: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Mr. Deputy Speaker, what is going on? The Member for Oropouche West is carrying on a running commentary.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Hold on, hold on. Members—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Members, Members, for the record, we know the procedure of the House. All right? A couple of seconds went, no one identified, the Minister of Finance raised his hand. That is all.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Minister of Finance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Ameen: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Member: Disrespecting the Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Chief Whip, please, please. Proceed, Minister of Finance.

Hon. C. Imbert: Thank you very much. Let me try my best now to deal with some of the more outlandish points made by Members opposite. The Leader of the

Opposition made the following statement—now, I have heard this from others—that the basis of the annual rental value is artificial. In fact, I heard some one of them say that the valuations are ghost valuations—I am not sure which one of them it was, which one of those Members over there. But in the Valuation of Land Act, there is a clear definition of the process, and it reads as follows:—

7.20 p.m.

What I realized from this debate, not only did not a single Member of the Opposition read the Bill, which only has four clauses, one of which is the title, so it really only has three operative clauses, and the third clause is—actually it is only three clauses looking at it now, and the last clause is the commencement date. So, one clause. So, not only did not a single Member of the Opposition read the Bill, which has one operative clause, but they also have not read the law and they said so many things that are just completely at variance to the printed laws of Trinidad and Tobago.

So, in the Valuation of Land Act, it says:

“...an estimate of the annual rent which particular land is likely to attract having regard to the purpose for which 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.”

That is how the annual rental value is calculated. So, that the Valuation Division will assess a property based on its location, based on its size, based on the market values, the rental value in the particular area, and so on. It is clear as crystal.

In addition, the Valuation of Land Act provides a very helpful explanation for how vacant land is valued, and that is in Schedule I and it explains that the annual rental value for vacant land is as follows: for agricultural land, it is 2per cent of the capital value of the lands and any agricultural buildings they are on.

That is the annual rental value of agricultural land. It is right there in the law. For residential vacant land, 3.5 per cent of its capital value; for commercial vacant land, 5 per cent of its capital value; and for industrial vacant land, 5 per cent of its capital value. It is right there in the law. But you listen to them you would think these things are not there. And in order to establish what is capital value, it is defined in the law. It is the sum, which the fee simple, might be expected to realize if offered for sale on such reasonable terms and conditions as a bona fide seller would require. So, the capital value is simply the market value. And for those opposite who “doh read”, fee simple means freehold, if you want to know.

Now, with respect to the inheritance of property, this is where the greatest mischief exists on the part of the Opposition. It is a terrible mischief. Because they are going all over the place talking about this horrible inheritance tax, which is to come. It is a complete fabrication, figment of their imagination, a fiction.

Again, in the law, section 27(2) of the Property Tax Act states as follows—and if you do not want to tell your supporters I will tell them, go and read section 27(2) of the Property Tax Act. It reads as follows:

Where on the application of the successor in title of the estate.

And, again, those who did not or may not have known that fee simple means freehold; successors in title of the estate means the people who inherit the land. Okay?

“The Board is satisfied”—by this it meant the Board of Inland Revenue—“having regard to the impoverished condition of the successors in title of the estate”—the people who inherit the land—“and his inability to improve his financial position significantly by reason of age, impaired health or other special circumstances, that undue hardship to that successor in title”—the inheritor—“would otherwise ensue, the Board may recommend that the

President”—the Cabinet—“authorize the total or partial exemption of the tax payable up to the death of the deceased owner.”

That is English. So, what it says, that if an impoverished person gets a deferral of the tax by reason of their impoverished condition, when they die the person who inherits the property, if they are similarly impoverished, they apply and the Board of Inland Revenue can either recommend to the Cabinet complete waiver of the tax or partial waiver of the tax. Come on hon. Members! Come on hon. Members!

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Hon. Members opposite are running a whole campaign based on fiction—

Mr. Hinds: Led by Kamla!

Hon. C. Imbert: —fiction, that when you inherit this thing you have pay all the accumulated taxes. You only have to pay the accumulated taxes if you have money and you are rich. If you are impoverished you “doh” have to pay. It is incredible the mischief, the misinformation, the bad information outside there, the untruths.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Go and read section 27(2) of the Property Tax Act. If you do not understand what it means—what is the Member down there?

Mr. Hinds: Chaguanas West.

Hon. C. Imbert: No, no, no, the one from the Maha Sabha; what is that one? Excuse me, what constituency?

Hon. Members: Chaguanas West.

Hon. C. Imbert: Chaguanas West; if you do not understand what section 27(2) of the Property Tax Act means, go and ask the Member for Chaguanas West. “Doh go by Barataria/San Juan. Doh go by Barataria/San Juan.”

Mr. Hinds: Go by Siparia!

Hon. C. Imbert: “Oh forget dat. Because Barataria/San Juan doh know nothing.”

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Address the Chair. Address the Chair, please.

Hon. C. Imbert: Sorry, sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker. “Barataria/San Juan, Mr. Deputy Speaker, doh know nothing about the law.” And I will demonstrate that in a short while. But if you want to understand what “fee simple” means, if you want to know what “successor in title” means and if you want to know what “exemption” means, go by the Member for Chaguanas West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Cool it, cool it, Member for Laventille West. Now, there is the other set of noise about we should not to give the Minister the power to vary the rate. Despite the fact that all throughout the Caribbean—and I will give you the example of Barbados. In the Barbados Land Tax Act under Section 6, it reads as follows—that is the equivalent of our Property Tax Act.

“6(1) Tax shall be levied and paid at such rates as may be specified by the Minister by order, and different rates may be specified in respect of land used for different purposes.”

So in Barbados, the Minister just signs an order, “tax change, just so”, with respect to property tax.

But we have a Constitution. And, again, I do not know who I should send them by on their side to check the Constitution, so I will simply educate. I will simply educate them, Mr. Deputy Speaker, through you. Under section 63 of our Constitution:

“63(1) A Bill other than a Money Bill may be introduced in either House; a Money Bill shall not be introduced in the Senate.”

But this is the salient point:

“63(2) Except on the recommendation or with the consent of the Cabinet neither House shall—

(a) proceed upon any Bill, including any amendment to a Bill, which, in the opinion of the person presiding...”

—which will be the Speaker—

“...makes provision for any of the following purposes:”

And the first one is:

“(i) for imposing or increasing any tax;”

This demonstrates that the framers of our Constitution wanted to make it crystal clear that a Minister of Finance cannot get up in the morning and increase tax “just so”. That Minister of Finance requires the consent of Cabinet, so it is a Government decision. So that deals with that. Go and read the Constitution, section 63.

But let me move along. So I do not think there was anything else that the Member for Siparia said that was relevant. So let us go now to the Member for Barataria/SanJuan. What on earth did he say? He said that local government reform is not truthful. Categories of land were only mentioned. He said the tax collected by corporations will be set off against the estimates. Total fiction, total fiction. In the Finance Act, 2023, I came to this Parliament in December and I got the approval of the House to this, the following, section 6(a)(iii) of the Finance Act, 2023 which states as follows:

“6(a)(iii)(2) The Minister may by Order, subject to negative resolution, authorise a Municipal Corporation to collect tax...”

You know, I have heard other Members over there say that does not exist, you know. Not only does it exist in the local government reform package, but it also exists in the Finance Act of 2023 and it makes it very, very, clear. That Act,

Finance Act, 2023, that the corporations will not only collect but they will retain it and use it for their purposes. It is there in black and white. So why do hon. Members keep coming to this House time and time and time again saying that the tax will not be retained and used by the corporations?

In fact, was it the Member for Barataria, Mr. Deputy Speaker, who said it goes into the Consolidated Fund? It was one of the hon. Members over there that said that, that the corporations cannot keep the tax, the law states it must go into the Consolidated Fund. There is an Act of Parliament, Finance Act, 2023, which authorizes the Minister to allow the corporations to collect and retain the tax. What on earth are they talking about?

The Member for Barataria/San Juan also got the whole question of the time to file an objection completely wrong. The Member indicated that the period was 21 days, that is totally wrong. The period of 21 days refers to the assessment notice from the Board of Inland Revenue. It is in the Property Tax Act and it refers to when you get a tax notice from the Board of Inland Revenue, you have 21 days to challenge it. It has nothing to do with the valuation notice, which comes from the Commissioner of Valuations under the Valuation of Land Act. That is why I said if Members opposite want legal advice go and check the Member for Chaguanas West. Do not put God out of your thoughts and get representation from the Member from Barataria/San Juan; do not even bother, you are bound to lose your case. So, there is nothing else that the Member for Barataria/San Juan said that was of significance.

Let us go now to the Member for Princes Town. Very loud, very, very loud, vociferous contribution; very, very loud. Again, peddling the fiction, the fairytale, the Nancy story that the corporations cannot keep the tax. Let me read again, section 6(a)(iii) of the Finance Act, 2023, which amended the Property Tax Act as

follows:

“6(a)(3) Notwithstanding any written law, a Municipal Corporation may retain...”

And if hon. Members do not know the meaning of the word ‘retain’ in its legal context, ask the Member for Chaguanas West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: “Notwithstanding any written law, a Municipal Corporation may retain for its own use all taxes collected which shall be paid into the Corporation Fund...”

Not the Consolidated Fund.

“...into the Corporation Fund established under section 109 of the Municipal Corporations Act.”

Black and white English that the corporations retain the property tax and they put it into the Corporation Fund; they do not put it in the Consolidated Fund. I mean, I just—sometimes I do not know what to do with hon. Members opposite. I just do not know what to do. I have already gone through section 63 of the Constitution, so I do not think I need to say anything more about that. I really have very little to say about that the Member for Oropouche East, except one thing.

7.35 p.m.

We have in the Chaguanas corporation, one councillor and one alderman. We have a councillor, the PNM that is, for the electoral district of Edinburgh/Longdenville South. Our councillor for Edinburgh/Longdenville South, Ms. Stacey Murphy, has sent me a message, and it reads as follows:

I wish to state categorically, that at no point my support was given to the Mayor and his UNC Council members’ position, on property tax. The Council consists of 12 members. The Mayor made his release on his own,

on behalf of his UNC members.

You know, that is all I have to say about the contribution of the Member for Oropouche East. He is a stranger to the truth, Mr. Deputy Speaker—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—a stranger to the truth.

Madam Speaker: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. C. Imbert: Camille, Camille. No, no. Numbers. No numbers, yes right? I ready to go, “yuh” know. So, what can really be said about this four-clause Bill?

PROCEDURAL MOTION

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 15(5), I beg to move that this House do sit until the conclusion of the matters before it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

PROPERTY TAX (AMDT.) BILL, 2024

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you. So, Madam Speaker, since not a single Member opposite spoke about the Bill, I think it is incumbent on me to let the public know what is in the Bill. Now, the most important thing that is in the Bill, or one of the more important things, is in clause 2(d), and it reads as follows:

“in Schedule I, in respect of the rate of tax payable...on residential land, by deleting the word ‘3’ and substituting the word ‘2’.”

What this means, is that if and when this Bill is approved by this House, the rate of property tax for residential land will be reduced by 33 percent, from 3 percent to 2 percent.

I have heard Members say they are not supporting that, they are not supporting this legislation, they are opposed to that, but I have never heard anybody opposed to a reduction in tax, this has to be a first. This is the first time as Minister of Finance in the last eight years that I have come into this Parliament and proposed a reduction in tax and the hon. Members opposite, the UNC say they not supporting that. “Whah it is, whah it is going on here?” So, if by some mistake we agree with you, we leave the tax at 3percent, you got to be kidding. So, I just do not understand the position of Members opposite, because it is not as if you have circulated an amendment to say, take it to zero, you simply said you are not supporting this Bill. But we are doing that because we see the need to phase in this legislation. The other important part of this legislation is the extension of time, and we are seeking to repeal section 52 of the Property Tax Act and substitute the following section:

“52 (1). If any act, or anything required to be done at or within a fixed time under this Act cannot or is not so done, the Minister may by Order, from time to time appoint a later time for doing the same, whether the time or any later time appointed within which the act ought to have done has or has not elapsed or expired.

(2) Any act done within the time or later time appointed by such Order shall be as valid as if it had been made or done within time prescribed.”

So, what this does, it defeats an argument I saw from the Member for Oropouche West, in the newspapers where he is saying that a whole set “ah” people are going to be exposed to a fine when they do not file their property tax, or they do not make their property tax payments by the appointed time.

7.40 p.m.

What this allows a Minister to do, not just that Minister of Finance, but

anybody who comes after me from whichever government, allows that Minister of Finance to extend the time for payment of the tax, extend the time for the imposition of penalties and interest by the Board of Inland Revenue, and extends the time for anything within the law that would create difficulty for people. But they are opposed to that, because they are opposed to the Bill. So they are opposed to the Minister of Finance having the power to extend a time up to ease up property owners.

So why would Members of Parliament want to oppose a measure that gives a Minister of Finance the ability to extend the time as we are doing, as we have done with the Valuation of Land Act? I have already signed the Order and it has been published for extending the time for persons to challenge a valuation from 30 days to six months. How could that be bad? How could it be bad to give people six months to challenge a valuation that they do not like or they think is irrational, instead of 30 days?

In my world, an extension of five months to allow people to question government action is good. In my world, reducing a tax from 3 per cent to 2 per cent, by 33 per cent, is good. In my world, giving a Minister of Finance the ability to delay the imposition of a tax, or the imposition of penalties, or the imposition of interest, in my world, that is good. And I dare say—I do not know how many Members they have over there, is it 19? Let us say the population of Trinidad and Tobago is 1.4 million, I dare say, 1,399,981 people in Trinidad and Tobago are in support of this—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—the reduction of the property tax from three to 2 per cent, the extension of time for imposition of fines and penalties. So what we have faced in this Parliament today, Madam Speaker, is a mixing, and maxing, and mismatching,

and a bundle of irrational arguments coming from Members opposite; totally irrational arguments. How could you oppose the lowering of a tax? Only a mad person will do that. And in addition, the one that bothers me the most, is this nonsense about an inheritance tax, and I want to go through it again.

Dr. Rowley: Again?

Hon. C. Imbert: It is important to go through it because the Member for Princes Town came with that Anansi story, the Member for Siparia came with that Anansi story, the Member for Oropouche West was in the papers with that Anansi story. I did not listen to the Member for Oropouche East “buh ah feel he talk about it as well, I eh sure”.

But let me put into the record, section 27(2) of the Property Tax Act, the people need to know the truth. They need to strip away the lies in the public domain, not in here.

Madam Speaker: Member, I think you have realized, so you could just retract and find another word and—

Hon. C. Imbert: Oh, certainly, Madam Speaker. We need to strip away the deceit outside; the deceitful campaign of misinformation that is in the public domain, outside of this Chamber, put there by a political party opposed to the PNM.

I want to repeat, section 27(2) reads as follows, where on the application of the successor in title of the estate:

“...the Board is satisfied, having regard to the impoverished condition of the successors in title of the estate and his inability to improve his financial position significantly by reason of age, impaired health or other special circumstances, that undue hardship to that successor in title would otherwise ensue, the Board may recommend that the President”—which means the

Cabinet—“authorise the total or partial exemption of the tax payable up to the death of the deceased owner”

Let me put that in simple English now. In the Property Tax Act, there is provision 27(2). It says that if a property owner has applied for a deferral of the tax by reason of being in an impoverished situation, they “cyah” pay the property tax, they demonstrate to the Board of Inland Revenue that they “cyah” pay, they are old-age pensioners, senior citizens’ recipients, they are receiving public assistance, they are receiving some other grant, they have proven to the Board of Inland Revenue that they cannot pay the property tax, however small it may be—because now the minimum tax which, was \$486, will now go down to about \$300—but they have proven to the Board of Inland Revenue they cannot pay \$300/\$400 a year in tax, so they apply for a deferral, they have received the deferral, they may live for 10 years after that and when they pass away, somebody will inherit the property. And 27(2) makes it crystal clear that the person who inherits the property, if they can demonstrate that:

“...by reason of age, impaired health or other special circumstances...”
—and that they have an “impoverished condition”, and that it would be undue hardship on them to make them pay all the accumulated tax, the Board of Inland Revenue simply recommends to the President that the tax is waived. That is in the law.

So this nancy story, that if you inherit a property from your old grandfather and it accumulated tax for 10/20 years, and you are in an impoverished condition, well “dey go” seize the property—the Government will seize the property, that is a complete falsehood. The people who drafted this Act, they thought everything through. Yes, there are one or two little things that we are tweaking now, like giving the Minister of Finance the power to extend the time for the payment of tax

and so on, but this was put inside of there in 2009, where an inheritor, a successor in title, if they are impoverished and they can demonstrate that it will be hardship if they have to pay the accumulated taxes, the Board of Inland Revenue recommends to the President partial or total waiver of the accumulated tax.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert: That has been there for 14 years and yet I am hearing a whole campaign going on for months. In the local government election, they had billboards up all over the country, big thing, “inheritance tax coming”, and when we demonstrated that that was a complete fabrication, they said, “Oh, is the property tax we talking about.” Well, I have now demonstrated that that too is a complete fabrication.

So this Bill before the House does many positive things, it reduces tax and it gives the Government the power to ease people up if, at some point in time in the future, it is determined that people need a little more time to deal with this property tax issue. It is the complete opposite of what hon. Members on the other side say it is. This is good law, this is helping people, this is easing up people—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. C. Imbert:—this is reducing taxes, and with those words, 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.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Question proposed: That clause 2 stand part of the Bill.

In paragraph (a), in the proposed new section 17A, delete the words

“subsection (1)” and substitute the words “section 17 (1)”

Madam Chairman: Minister of Finance.

Mr. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman. There is a typographical error in clause 2(a), and this was first drawn to my attention by the Member for San Fernando West, long before the Sitting began, and I have circulated an amendment and we are changing the words “subsection (1)” to the words “17(1)”. So I would like to move that the Bill be amended as circulated.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Speaker.

Madam Chairman: Member for Siparia.

Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC: We are pleased with this amendment. Thank you, Madam. This amendment, as I said, this was done so hastily which caused this error, but corrected at the moment.

Mr. Imbert: May I respond to that, please? It is a minor typographical error. This happens all the time. And this is what committee stage is for, to correct minor typographical errors.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

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

House resumed.

Madam Speaker: The Minister of Finance.

Hon. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. It is my pleasure to report that the Property Tax (Amdt.) Bill, 2024, which reduces tax, was considered in committee of the whole and approved with an amendment. I now beg to move that the House agree with the committee’s report.

Property Tax (Amdt.) Bill, 2024
 Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2024.03.18

Bill reported, with amendment.

Hon. Imbert: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. I thank all Members on the other side for allowing good sense to prevail.

Question put: That the Bill be now read a third time.

7.55 p.m.

Mr. Lee: Division.

The House divided: Ayes 20 Noes 15

AYES

Robinson-Regis, Hon. C.

Rowley, Hon. Dr. K.

Imbert, Hon. C.

Hinds, Hon. F.

Deyalsingh, Hon. T.

Al-Rawi, Hon. F.

Beckles, Hon. P.

Webster-Roy, Hon. A.

Cudjoe-Lewis, Hon. S.

Gadsby-Dolly, Hon. Dr. N.

Gonzales, Hon. M.

Mc Clashie, Hon. S.

Ford, E.

de Nobriga, Hon. S.

Leonce, Hon. A.

Manning, Hon. B.

Morris-Julian, Hon. L.

Scotland, K.

UNREVISED

Richards, K.

Monroe, R.

NOES

Lee, D.

Persad-Bissessar SC, Mrs. K.

Ameen, Ms. K.

Indarsingh, R.

Padarath, B.

Moonilal, Dr. R.

Ratiram, R.

Bodoe, Dr. L.

Rambally, R.

Ram, A.

Ragbir, Dr. R.

Tancoo, D.

Mohit, V.

Haynes-Alleyne, Mrs. A.

Seecheran, Dr. R.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Deputy Commissioner of Police

(Nomination of Ms. Suzette Martin)

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very warmly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion, standing at this time in my name.

Whereas section 123(1)(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago (“the Constitution”) provides that the Police Service Commission shall have the power to appoint persons to hold or act in the office of Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Police;

And whereas section 123(3) of the Constitution provides that the Police Service Commission shall submit to the President a list of the names of the persons nominated for appointment to the office of Commissioner or Deputy Commissioner of Police;

And whereas section 123(4) of the Constitution provides that the President shall issue a Notification in respect of each person nominated under subsection (3) and the Notification shall be subject to affirmative resolution of the House of Representatives;

And whereas the Police Service Commission has submitted to the President the name Ms. Suzette Martin for appointment to the office of Deputy Commissioner of Police;

And whereas the President has on the 12th day of March, 2024 issued a Notification in respect of the nomination;

And whereas it is expedient to approve the Notification:

Be it resolved that the Notification of the President of the nomination by the Police Service Commission of Ms. Suzette Martin to the office of Deputy Commissioner of Police be approved.

Madam Speaker, Suzette Martin is aptly described as a resourceful, accomplished and devoted police leader with over 25 years of profound law enforcement knowledge and experience. Exceptionally competent at leading, supervising, guiding and coordinating day-to-day operations in the police service including complex investigations and intelligence. An effective communicator

with remarkable success in managing teams of police officers, leading in every setting to improve the performance. A certified mediator with proven expertise in conflict resolution, and also a member of the International Association of Chiefs of Police and the International Homicide Investigators Association.

Suzette Martin has demonstrated over the years, the ability to provide strategic leadership and management in an organizational setting, including having an expert knowledge of the Police Service Act and Regulations; knowledge of the department, police guidelines and techniques of crime prevention, detection, and the preservation of physical evidence, including an expert knowledge of principles and practices in police administration, organization and corporation.

She is practiced and skilled in modern investigative and intelligence skills, including sound knowledge of court procedures. Possessed of a sound knowledge of administrative principles and practices including programme development, and the monitoring in the context of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. Suzette Martin is also a certified Fingerprint Officer with strong crime scene capability. Among elements of her professional experiences, she as woman Senior Superintendent of Police, from 2021 to the present, led the Professional Standards Bureau of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

At that Bureau, they are responsible for and led by her for ensuring the integrity, transparency and efficiency of all investigations including, criminal complaints made against police officers of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, implementing and developing technology systems and processes to provide for accountability and trust in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Services internal investigations.

Suzette Martin led the department that would recommend police officers for suspension and transfer and cessation of special reserve police officers; directs,

supervises and conducts inquiries and audits of all aspects of police activities for the purpose of ascertaining whether there is police corruption and/or serious police misconduct, and of course, directs and coordinates large scale police exercises, complex and sensitive investigations.

Suzanne Martin worked with the Homicide Bureau of Investigations, where she spent the years between 2000 and 2020, as a woman police, Senior Superintendent between 2019 and 2020, in particular. Of course, Ms. Martin would have designed policies and procedures, coordinated and implemented training lectures to ensure the strategic goals and objectives of the department and organization are achieved.

Madam Speaker, Suzette Martin would have joined the police service in 19-ninety—she was enlisted in 1997, worked at the Besson Street the very challenging training ground of the Besson Street Police Station for two years, went to the Fraud Squad where she served from 2000 and onward. She would have served as a Police Constable between the years 2002 and 2006, promoted to Corporal in 2006, held that rank until 2008 and then proceeded to the rank of Sergeant from 2008 to 2014, when she was promoted to the rank of police Inspector. The rank that she held until she was promoted to Assistant Superintendent of Police in 2016.

Madam Speaker, in terms of her qualifications, education and training, she attained from the Anglia Ruskin University, a master's in business administration with a merit mark with specialization and leadership, entrepreneurship and innovation. That was not all, she recently completed another master's in international business and commercial law, with a focus on digital law and cybersecurity. She attained that degree in 2023 from the said Anglia Ruskin University.

Madam Speaker, she holds a diploma from the UWI School of Business and Applied Studies, ROYTEC, in particular and she acquired that diploma in project management in 2011. In terms of executive certifications, she would have been certified by the Arthur Lok Jack Global School of Business, right here in Trinidad and Tobago of course, and attained a professional certificate in sustainable community development. And from the Coady International Institute of Canada, she acquired certification as a Global Change Leader in 2016 and of course, from the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center, International Law Enforcement Academy, she was certified on the basis of women in Law Enforcement Supervisors Leadership Training Program in 2015, as well.

In terms of specialized skill very quickly, Madam Speaker, she did a programme of Spanish speaking for law enforcement and 2020, life coaching which is important for the young officers that she would steward and shepherd and mentor when they come into the organization and work with her and in the police service generally; recognizing human trafficking indicators for law enforcement officers—she acquired certification in that, very important with the burgeoning crime circumstance around human trafficking in particular; she acquired certification in practical mediation skills—very important for modern day policing, and of course, leadership skills for supervisors in 2014 and of course, certification in dealing with difficult people—certification, I think, I would like to acquire in this House sometime.

So, Madam Speaker, she belongs to the International Association of Chiefs of Police, and of course, attended various conferences, homicide conferences, both in 2019 and 2018 and she belongs to the California Homicide Investigators Association and, of course, the International Homicide Investigators Association as well.

So, Madam Speaker, these are some snippets from a very long and illustrious career, leading to her having made application for and having been notified by Her Excellency for the attention of this House of Representatives and therefore with those things said, Madam Speaker, I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

8.10 p.m.

Madam Speaker: Member for Oropouche East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. Roodal Moonilal (*Oropouche East*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to speak on this Motion, in the name now, of the Minister of National Security. Madam Speaker, as we are aware, this is certainly not the first occasion that the House will debate and consider a nominee assessed by the Police Service Commission, for a very critical position in the leadership in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. A critical position at a most critical time, given the spiraling out of control, of serious crime and murder in particular, and there is no need to remind ourselves of what transpired over the last 72 hours or so. But, it is a very difficult period in the history of this country, and law enforcement, extremely difficult, made worse by an incompetent government.

Ms. Martin, incidentally—one of the few times that we have a nominee before us with only two names, Suzette Martin. Normally there are three to four names you have here. Ms. Martin comes—as the Minister of National Security read in some detail from her curriculum vitae, her resume, Ms. Suzette Martin has a very outstanding background in training, in education, in law enforcement. Unlike other candidates for the position of Deputy Commissioner of Police, as the

case may be, some of us on this side, many of us may not have a firsthand knowledge of Ms. Suzette Martin.

Ms. Martin, spent a considerable amount of time in homicide, so, the good news is that we do not know her. If we knew her, it would have been a different story. But, has spent a lot of time in homicide and in policing, the operational side of policing, including short periods in other units as well, but I think it is rooted in homicide, and has enormous exposure to various courses, and education and so on. And when you look at the CV, Madam Speaker, there is very little that one can question or one can, you know, be critical of it. It is indeed from my reviewing the CV, a good nine pages in depth, of training and critical skills, objectives, life mission, and exposure and so on.

Madam Speaker, I just wanted to say, that in doing this job that we are asked to do, by law, it is not a difficult—it is not an easy job because we have to reflect and give critical consideration to candidates, which is a very serious part of our work. But, in no way our reflection on candidates reflects a personal attack, a personal condemnation, because, as I said in opening is that we are not even aware of her. We have never met, we have never interacted—sometimes police officers come here for debate and over the years they have worked in some division of law enforcement that involves access and interfacing with elected Members and so on, so we know them. We do not know Suzette Martin that way, and our reflections on her do not reflect—do not mean anything in terms of any personal attack, any, you know, unwarranted aspersion on her character necessarily, but we have to do a job and this job is not an easy job because we are reflecting upon very senior members of law enforcement. Persons who have given, you know, their entire adult life to public service, and when you are in law enforcement it is not just your life of work, it is literally your life.

As the Member for Laventille West knows very well, a police sergeant just on the weekend was gunned down. Not necessarily in the of course of duty but is a member of the TTPS as well, and they give their—they literally put their life on the line. So, it is not just a public officer but a special type of public officer and we have to reflect on them as part of our job. This is not an examination of the person but we must be, you know, open minded in doing this business. And, Madam Speaker, I was particularly impressed by the CV, by the awards, the commendations, the international linkages, the network, and so on. But there are couple of issues that I would like to raise.

Now, I did not hear the Minister indicate whether or not the Government is in support of this nominee because we were debating quite recently, Mr. Wendell Lucas, and the shocker came on the vote. The shocker to the Members of the Government as well, came in the vote. So, the Minister was very careful not to indicate that the Government is supporting. He indicated he read the CV, so we are first suspicious that there was only a reading of the CV as opposed to an endorsement that the Government is in support.

8:15 p.m.

But, Madam Speaker, I want to reflect now on a few matters pertinent to the issue of fitness, pertinent to the issue of whether or not the candidate can exist, can sustain herself given certain that the issues that have been in the public domain and maybe an issue or two that have not been in the public domain, and these are serious matters.

Madam Speaker, this officer, without casting aspersions at all on the conduct of the officer, came to light on a matter involving an accident, I believe, on the Priority Bus Route, and there is an article in the daily *Express*, October 20, 2023, headlined:

UNREVISED

“Senior cop charged with dangerous driving.”

And in discussing this with my colleague from Barataria/San Juan, he made a good observation. He said, if you go to KFC to apply to be a cashier you have to get a police Certificate of Character but if you come to the Parliament for a Deputy Commissioner of Police, there is no certificate of good character required. Because you see, Madam Speaker, this person—and from the newspaper, the daily *Express*:

“Senior Superintendent Suzette Martin of the Professional Standards Bureau...has been charged in connection with a road traffic accident. She was charged by way of summons, on Wednesday,”—this is October last year—”with dangerous driving in connection with an incident on the Priority Bus Route...on April 18 this year, in which she allegedly struck a 14-year-old schoolboy while he was crossing the PBR near the Croisee in San Juan.

The charge was laid by ACP Wayne Mystar of Specialised Support.

Martin is to appear before a Port of Spain magistrate on October 27 to answer the charge.”

I make this point, without reading excessively into this case, to indicate that the officer has been charged for a serious enough offence of dangerous driving.

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker—

Dr. R. Moonilal: What Standing Order, please?

Mr. Hinds: Standing Order 41.

Madam Speaker: Both Members—

Hon. Member: 49.

Mr. Hinds: 49—

Madam Speaker: Both Members cannot be on their legs.

Deputy Commissioner of Police
Dr. Moonilal (cont'd)

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker—

Ms. Ameen: What Standing Order?

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: Standing Order—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Mr. Al-Rawi: Standing Order 49, sub judice.

Mr. Hinds: Standing Order 49 on the sub judice principle. I simply want to say—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Mr. Hinds: Madam Speaker, I simply want to say that the matter is before the court and for that reason, I urge the Speaker to caution the Member in terms of his traversing of it.

Madam Speaker: Okay. So I believe the Member indicated that he was not going to go into the facts. Okay? So you have mentioned the matter and therefore, be cautioned accordingly. Please move on without going further.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal: Thank you very much. And, Madam Speaker, in addition, I did say in the beginning that I cast no aspersions on the person but I just put for the record the matter of fact which was reported in the daily *Express*; the matter of fact—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Dr. R. Moonilal:—that the police officer is charged for dangerous driving. The matter will, you know, continue, I do not know when, but that is a serious enough offence to consider an applicant that is herself before the court. I say no more on that. It is a matter that—yeah.

But, Madam Speaker, there was another issue that came to my attention, that is not before the court and in my possession. Madam Speaker, I begin by saying

that I did receive documentation from someone, which involved letters, in my possession now, which I readily believe to be accurate. I will not read, Madam Speaker, all these letters and certainly not in detail, but to make the point of the letters and to make the point of the correspondence which I have received, which involve very serious issues concerning conduct, integrity and professionalism by several persons, including the candidate that is before us.

And there is a very serious issue involving the conduct of a police investigation involving one Kevon Vasquez, in 2023, just last year, in which another police officer by the name of Sergeant Haywood has made very startling observations and conclusions on the professionalism and the conduct of the candidate before us. The Minister may or may not be aware of that, but in a memorandum, it started on Wednesday 15, February, 2023; another memo of February 20, 2023; another one of March 17, 2023—March 27, 2023; a very lengthy missive of July 05, 2023; and the last piece of correspondence on the said matter, Thursday, 17 August, 2023.

So it is a matter that engaged several officers and in a nutshell, I will just indicate what it is because I do not wish to read the details into the record that way, but to indicate that very serious allegations have been made against this particular candidate by a police officer in one case; a police officer, a senior police officer as well, as it relates to the conduct of investigations into criminal offences involving firearms and instructions that have been allegedly given by this nominee to the police officer in question, who took it upon himself to write, in one case, a very long letter to the Deputy Commissioner, Intelligence and Investigations, dated July 05, 2023, and the subject—I will just read the subject because the subject speaks of it,

Alleged attempt by a senior officer to pervert the course of justice.

And it details serious concerns about the conduct of the nominee in giving instructions to a sergeant concerning a particular issue involving the investigations into the FUL, which was a very long-drawn-out process, I believe, last year undertaken by the Professional Standards Bureau, in circumstances when investigations taking place on FUL and owners and dealers had absolutely nothing to do with police officers, which the Professional Standards Bureau means investigation, the conduct of enquiry, laying of charges against law enforcement officers. That is why it is called the Professional Standards Bureau. And there are certain investigations that were undertaken last year, sent to the Professional Standards Bureau, that had nothing to do with police officers and a particular sergeant, in this case, made several complaints to the Deputy Commissioner of Police and elsewhere, I believe, concerning interaction with this particular nominee, and instructions which the nominee allegedly gave to him, which he believed to be unlawful and against the policy and procedure of the police and had serious, serious problems with and left it with the Deputy Commissioner of Police.

The reason why I do not want to get into detail on this is that there may not be, to my knowledge, a conclusion on this and I do not wish to go into detail, in terms of the allegations and so on, because at the end of the day, we do not know, I do not have a concluding report, but what I do have is a list of very serious, serious allegations made by a very senior police officer who claims that the nominee in question interfered unlawfully with the conduct of an investigation into criminal offences involving firearms. I do not have a concluding report on the matter, but that is the reason why I prefer not to go further on that.

But, Madam Speaker, I do have in my hand another document which speaks to a very critical matter. It is a judgment of Mr. Justice Devindra Rampersad dated April 25, 2023. This is the famous Brent Thomas judgment, in which—again, I am

not interested in reading everything and not a lot and so on, but in which the court found that the nominee herself was one of three officers that went to Barbados, that unlawfully detained and abducted a Trinidadian citizen in Barbados and brought them back to Trinidad and Tobago. And Ms. Martin is named—in fact, I am quoting now from the order, number 235.2:

“The procurement...”—of—“...the application of Assistant Superintendent Nigel Birch,”—in this case—“and the execution by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service on the 22 September 2022 of a search warrant at the property...”—was deemed to be—“...unconstitutional, unlawful, unlawful, arbitrary unnecessary and disproportionate...”

This was undertaken by the Professional Standards Bureau, of which the nominee was head at the material time.

Madam Speaker, in the judgment as well, it speaks to the fact that three officers conducted an operation involving leaving Trinidad and Tobago, going to Barbados, and it says here, and I quote at point 225:

“That ASP Birch and those who were involved on the day...”—including—“...SS Martin and Corporal Joefield - have not faced sanctions for their clearly, and admittedly, unlawful acts as police officers, as far as this court has been informed, and that they have been able to continue in their offices without investigation is, to my mind, a shameful blot on this country.”

High Court judge concluded that it was shameful on the country's image that this took place, an abduction of a citizen in Barbados, unlawful, and involved in this, according to the judgment now—this is not reading a newspaper account—according to the judgment, Senior Superintendent Martin, Corporal Joefield and one Mr. ASP Birch.

Madam Speaker, again, this matter has been aired in the public domain in terms of the treatment of Mr. Brent Thomas in Barbados, who alleged that he was actually held in a cage, he was abducted and brought back to this country. We have never had details of this matter in terms of who authorized the police to travel. When the police has to go abroad, it must be authorized in the conduct of their duty. Even vacation, they need permission from the Commissioner of Police for vacation if they are travelling abroad. In this case, in the conduct of their duty, they required permission from the Commissioner of Police and/or the Minister of National Security, or the Prime Minister. We have never heard who authorized the use of either a commercial aircraft or a military aircraft, the approach to the regional security system, the approach to the Barbados police force. We have never, ever heard the details of this and the Member of Parliament for Siparia is on record on this matter, and I just quote from an article in the *Express* on May 11, 2023:

“Opposition Leader Kamla Persad-Bissessar has written to Barbados Prime Minister Mia Mottley, calling for a full enquiry into the ‘abduction’ of Trinidad and Tobago national Brent Thomas from Barbados....”

—as she—meaning, in this case, the Opposition Leader—detailed the terror he suffered, including being kept in a cage. And this was in response to this horrific judgment that I alluded to earlier. Mrs. Persad-Bissessar continued:

““The chilling facts outlined in the judgment represent a blotch in our nation’s democracy. It raises serious concerns of extra-judicial exercise of coercive powers by the law enforcement bodies of both our sovereign nations.

The series of events involving the abduction of Mr Thomas calls for transparency and accountability. It has caused damage to the reputation of

both our nations”—speaking to the Prime Minister of Barbados—“which subscribe to the fundamental rule of law. To restore confidence and in the interest of the people of our two nations, I respectfully call upon you...Prime Minister...to initiate a full, public enquiry into this matter.”

And it repeats the article that:

“...April 28,”—2023—“Energy Minister”—in this case—“Stuart Young confirmed that the airplane used in Thomas’ abduction in Barbados was...”—executed by the—“...(RSS)...”—aircraft—“...out of Barbados.”

Madam Speaker: So I do not think we are really going into Brent Thomas case. I think the point has been made. I ask you to move on, please.

8.30 p.m.

Dr. R. Moonilal: So, Madam Speaker, these facts that I put now on the Table and on the public record involving this case, these are facts. It is a concluded matter of the High Court, they are very serious and, again, it speaks to the fitness for purpose, the fitness of the person. I made it my business not to tread in detail on allegations from one officer on a next officer, but to raise the matter as a serious concern.

There was also a matter, Madam Speaker, where some people may recall in the Vindra Naipaul trial there was issue arising involving this nominee as well. When questioned by the defence counsel in that case, it was deemed to be a personal matter, but it arose. Again, I do not go into details on these things, but to put it to the Government whether or not the Government will want to also consider as they did with Mr. Wendell Lucas the fitness at this time of this particular officer in light of the Brent Thomas matter, in light of those internal matters that have received the attention of the Deputy Commissioner of Police and in light of other issues involving the person.

I will just end by saying that, again, I cast no aspersions on this person. I personally have never met her in life, but I raise these issues because they are public issues and very serious. In fact, of all the Deputy Commissioners of Police we have not had this type of information to bring to the public domain to place in the Parliament that we are putting now in a very serious manner. I would just leave it with the Government there rather than go into any gory detail about what I certainly read. Anything else? So, Madam Speaker, thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Tobago East.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

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

Thank you, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me and for giving me the opportunity to make a brief intervention. I just listened to the hon. Member for Oropouche East and he started off his contribution by indicating that often times we come here to vote on commissioners, deputy commissioners and we do not know the individuals, but we go based on their CV and based on what might be read out or what might be in the public domain. Madam Speaker, today I stand before you a proud Roxborough girl because I know this individual.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. A. Webster-Roy: Madam Speaker, in terms of her character, nobody is perfect, but in terms of her character, her passion for policing, her commitment to integrity, Madam Speaker, her dedication to ensuring a robust police service, my interactions with her over the years, Madam Speaker, I feel proud that today I have the opportunity to vote for somebody that I could vouch for. Today, I have the opportunity to lay my voice and the voice of my constituents for an individual that we know, Madam Speaker.

Deputy Commissioner of Police
Hon. A. Webster-Roy (cont'd)

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Madam Speaker, Suzette Martin has dedicated her live to policing. She has been genuine in her service not only to the police service, but her service to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. She has been able to balance policing and being mother who is committed. Madam Speaker, one of the things I would guarantee the Member for Oropouche East is, despite what may have been read into the record, when it comes to her commitment to ensuring a just police service, a just Trinidad and Tobago, when it comes to professional qualifications, Ms. Martin fits the bill. And I proud to be a Member of this team today when her nomination is brought before this honourable House and lend my personal support and the support of the people of Tobago East and the support of the people of Roxborough for Ms. Martin, who has dedicated her life to policing in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, I thank you very much.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of National Security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of National Security (Hon. Fitzgerald Hinds): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I feel obliged to response but rather briefly to the observations made by the Member for Oropouche East. In respect of the Brent Thomas matter I would say that, what arose in the court on that occasion was a constitutional motion. We have a written Constitution since 1962 and, of course, all that flowed from it and then, of course, the 1976 element of the Constitution. From the very day that it took effect there have hundreds if not thousands of constitutional actions, motions all against the State. But the Constitution and legal position is, is that only the State that can infringe one's constitutional rights. So whenever a citizen or a visitor to Trinidad and Tobago feels that their constitutional rights were affected, the doors of the courts and this is

another constitutional principle are always opened and opened very widely to such circumstances.

So that the matter that the Member referred to, sub judice as it is, because the State appealed the decision of Mr. Justice Rampersad and that matter is yet to be heard. So in that sense it is sub judice, but suffice it to say that it was a challenge against the State, in that the State is alleged to have contravened certain constitutional rights. In those circumstances, the Attorney General of Barbados made a statement that is on record in Trinidad and Tobago. Of course, there were pronouncements by the learned judge. As I said, the matters or the matter is on appeal and I would content myself with saying, it is not a personal action against any particular individual. It is a constitutional motion alleging that rights have been infringed and those matters are before the court as we speak on appeal. End of text in that regard.

In respect of the other item that the Member raised about some citizen called Vasquez, the Member made reference to certain pieces of correspondence. He described them quite correctly I understand it as allegations, and he even went as far as to say, these actions were believed by some individual to be unlawful. That alone tells you there is no determination in that regard.

I did mention in my opening remarks that the Professional Standards Bureau deals with police misconduct, police corruption and therefore when you work in that particular unit or you, more particularly lead it, you can expect logically and reasonably to be the subject of a lot allegations, a lot of discussions, a lot of correspondence. Suffice it to say, I happen to know the officer personally. Something I would not place too much stock on. I too relied on the documentation that would have come to me. I too would have had an opportunity to see the officer at work over many years, and most of all I must admit on this occasion, I

would have consulted with the senior ranks of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service and I can tell you that I gleaned and I gather that there is support for Ms. Martin in this regard. No objection whatsoever in this regard from those discussions.

So let me move on therefore to the question—oh, before I do that, the Member for Oropouche East in his misunderstanding told us that, Ms Martin leads the Professional Standards Bureau which we now all understand and its purport. But the Member overlooked the fact because he expressed shock and horror that the matter of Vasquez had nothing to do with professional standards because it did not involve a police officer. I simply want to remind the Member for Oropouche East that every single police officer is so empowered to be under the Police Service Act, Chap. 15:01, every one of them possess all of the powers that that particular law imbibes or invests or vests, sorry, in them. Therefore, you could be working homicide, you could be working as a police instructor in the Academy, you could working in the administration branch, if in your view as a police officer, police action is required in any particular matter, it is well within your lawful authority to deal with it. So the Member in his misunderstanding might have wrongly felt that the Professional Standards Bureau are confined to officers of the police service but, of course, if they are coming down Frederick Street and they see a man breaking into a store or carrying an illegal firearm, it is police and they will act as police, so that does not surprise me in the Vasquez matter.

Let me proceed swiftly to the other matter where there is, according to the Member, a charge for dangerous driving and indeed there is. I happen to have in my hand the official, a copy of the court record of what is known to police as the summary of evidence, and on this occasion it is actually signed by the charging officer.

Deputy Commissioner of Police
Hon. F. Hinds (cont'd)

2024.03.18

Madam Speaker: Member, is this not the same matter that you raised?

Hon. F. Hinds: No. No. No. I just want—

Madam Speaker: I want to make sure.

Hon. F. Hinds: Yes. But the Member made—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

Madam Speaker: Okay. So this is the same one with respect to the sub judice that is still pending?

Hon. F. Hinds: Yes.

Madam Speaker: So I will ask, again, same warning. Please do not go into it.

Hon. F. Hinds: I was simply commenting. The Member raised it and I am simply responding to that very, very briefly without going into any details.

Madam Speaker: I think I heard you talking about some official court records.

Hon. F. Hinds: Not that.

Madam Speaker: Just be mindful.

Hon. F. Hinds: All I would say therefore, Madam Speaker, all I would I say is that that matter is before the court—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Hon. F. Hinds:—and, of course, in deference to you and you exclusively, Madam Speaker, because the Member did make reference to it, it is not—we have reclassified, Madam Speaker, traffic offences and I would say, the Parliament—

Hon. Members: [*Interruption*]

Madam Speaker: Member, just one minute please, Minister of National Security. I would like to hear the contribution. Minister of National Security.

Hon. F. Hinds: Madam Speaker, suffice it to say that the Government is aware of that particular issue and the police service is aware of this, and the matter is, as I said earlier, before the court. In those circumstances, Madam Speaker, I commend

Deputy Commissioner of Police
 Hon. F. Hinds (cont'd)

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forcefully and enthusiastically the notification of Suzette Martin for the consideration of all the Members of this House. I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

The House divided: Ayes 18 Noes 14

AYES

Robinson-Regis, Hon. C.

Imbert, Hon. C.

Hinds, Hon. F.

Deyalsingh, Hon. T.

Al-Rawi, Hon. F.

Beckles, Hon. P.

Webster-Roy, Hon. A.

Cudjoe-Lewis, Hon. S.

Gadsby-Dolly, Hon. Dr. N.

Gonzales, Hon. M.

Mc Clashie, Hon. S.

Forde, E.

de Nobriga, Hon. S.

Leonce, Hon. A.

Manning, Hon. B.

Scotland, K.

Richards, K.

Monroe, R.

NOES

Lee, D.

Persad-Bissessar SC, Mrs.

Ameen, Ms. K.

Indarsingh, R.

Padarath, B.

Moonilal, Dr. R.

Ratiram, R.

Bodoe, Dr. L.

Rambally, D.

Ragbir, Dr. R.

Tancoo, D.

Mohit, Ms. V.

Haynes-Alleyne. Mrs. A.

Seecheran, Dr. R.

Question agreed to.

8.45 p.m.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

ADJOURNMENT

Madam Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday the 22nd day of March, 2024, at 1.30 p.m. Madam Speaker, that is Private Members' Day, and we await the Member for Pointe-a-Pierre who will tell us what we will be doing.

Mr. Lee: Madam Speaker, I will communicate with my friend what we are doing. Tomorrow morning I will send her a message.

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, there is one matter that qualifies to be raised on

the Motion for the Adjournment of this House. I have been advised, by agreement, that this matter will be deferred to a subsequent Sitting. Whip, Leader of the House.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 8.47 p.m.