

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES***Friday, June 13, 2025*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

**PRAYERS**[MR. SPEAKER *in the Chair*]**CONDOLENCES****(DR. WINSTON WILLIAMS)**

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Members, I wish to inform this House of the passing of former Member of Parliament, Dr. Winston Williams who passed away on May 29, 2025. Dr. Williams served as the Member of Parliament for Fyzabad in the First and Second Republican Parliaments. I would now invite Members to pay their respective tributes to Dr. Williams. I first call on the Member for Fyzabad.

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

**The Minister of Finance and Minister in the Ministry of Planning Economic Affairs and Development (Hon. Davendranath Tancoo):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker it is with profound respect that I rise to convey on behalf of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, our heartfelt condolences on the passing of Dr. Winston Williams, a former Member of Parliament for the constituency of Fyzabad, a dedicated medical doctor, and a devoted servant of the people.

Dr. Williams served in the First and Second Republican Parliaments from 1976 to 1986. His decade-long representation of the people of Fyzabad was marked by a deep commitment to improving the lives of his constituents and fostering a sense of community and progress. Dr. Williams was known for his compassionate approach to health care. Ensuring that every individual received the care and attention they deserved regardless of their circumstances. His medical

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practice was not just a profession but a God-given calling, one that he pursued with unwavering dedication and empathy. Beyond his medical career, Dr. Williams was a champion for social justice and economic development within Fyzabad. He worked tirelessly to implement policies that would create opportunities for education, employment and infrastructural improvements in the region. Colleagues and constituents alike admired his integrity and tireless work ethic which set a benchmark for public service. Dr. Williams' legacy is one of hope and inspiration.

His efforts to bridge gaps and build a stronger community has left an indelible mark on the hearts of those he served. As we remember his contributions, we are reminded of the power of dedicated public service and the impact that one individual can have on the lives of many. Today, we remember not only a former parliamentarian but also a patriot who devoted his intellectual, medical and moral gifts to the upliftment of Trinidad and Tobago.

As we mourn his passing we also celebrate a life well lived in service to others and a legacy of honour, integrity and dedicated service. To his family and loved ones, we, in the Government of Trinidad and Tobago extend our sincerest condolences. May Dr. Winston Williams rest in eternal peace. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Can I now invite the Member for San Fernando East.

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

**Mr. Brain Manning** (*San Fernando East*): Thank you Mr. Speaker for the opportunity to express condolences to the family and friends of Dr. Winston Williams. Dr. Winston Williams was a medical doctor and a former Member of Parliament in Trinidad and Tobago. He served as the Member for Fyzabad in the First and Second Republican Parliaments from 1976 to 1981 and 1981 to 1986.

Dr. Williams passed away on May 29, 2025 at the age of 89. His contributions to public service and health care were recognized throughout his career. Dr. Winston Williams was a pillar of both medicine and governance in Trinidad and Tobago, serving his community with dedication and integrity. His career spanned decades, leaving a lasting impact on health care and public policy.

During his time in Parliament, Dr. Williams advocated for policies that improved health care access, social welfare and community development. His parliamentary contributions included health care reform, pushing for better medical infrastructure and accessibility in under-served areas; public welfare initiatives, supporting programs aimed at improving living conditions for vulnerable populations, and legislative debates engaging in discussions that shape national policy, particularly in health and social services.

As a medical doctor, Dr. Williams was deeply committed to community health, ensuring that patients received quality care regardless of their financial status. His work emphasized preventative medicine advocating for early intervention and health education; patient-centered care, prioritizing accessibility and compassionate treatment, medical ethic and leadership, setting high standards for professionalism in the health care sector. Former parliamentary colleagues praised his integrity and leadership noting his thoughtful approach to legislative debates and his advocacy for improved medical services.

Community members reflected on his compassionate nature, recalling his dedication to patient care and his efforts to uplift underserved populations. Dr. Williams' legacy is one of service, compassion and leadership leaving a lasting impact on both medicine and governance. His work in Parliament and the medical field reflected a deep commitment to public well-being ensuring that his influence would be felt long after his tenure. Dr. Williams passed away at the age of 89,

leaving behind a legacy of service, compassion and leadership. His contributions to medicine and governance will continue to inspire future generations. His work in Parliament and the medical field reflected a deep commitment to public well-being ensuring that its impact will be felt long after today. May God bless and strengthen his friends and family and may Dr. Williams rest in peace.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Members, I too should like to offer my tributes to the life, service and dedication of the late Dr. Winston Williams.

Dr. Williams, if you will allow me to call him that, entered political life in the 1970, answering both a humbling but significant call to represent the Fyzabad constituency in southern Trinidad. His decision to serve in this role came as no surprise to the nation and the community which already knew him as a dedicated pharmacist and later a medical doctor. Professions which both embodied the diligence and deep commitment to caring for people across all works of life. During his time in the First and Second Republican Parliament, Dr. Williams was involved in crafting and debating significant legislation which had far reaching impacts, including the Pharmacy Board Amendment Bill. This subject was undoubtedly close to his heart, given his professional background.

He also served on committees, including the Rationalization of The Sugar Industry. The work of this Committee was aimed at the modernization and diversification of the sugar industry. During his contribution at the stage of the adoption of the report, Dr. Williams noted that whilst mechanization meant redundancy and job loss, his primary concern was for the people who were subject to such job loss. As such he called for, and advocated for, the absorption of these citizens in other gainful employment streams so as to ensure the lack of hardship and the people continue to maintain meaningful employment. He was a fervent

advocate for ensuring a growing population had adequate and accessible health facilities and an adequate number of health professionals to attend to their growing and attendant needs.

Undoubtedly, his contribution to the debate on the establishment of the Mount Hope Medical Complex for the training of health professionals was both critical and he did so in an impassioned manner. His plea for education and skills to enhance these sectors came as no surprise, as Dr. Williams maintained a steadfast commitment to education and community development.

**1.40 p.m.**

He was a member of the Pharmaceutical Society of Trinidad and Tobago and the holder of the Licentiate in Midwifery of the Royal Colleges of Physicians and Surgeons. These are medical qualifications awarded by the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland and with the founding of the medical school of Mount Hope, he ensured that similar skill sets will be accessible to citizens of every walk of life. Hon. Members, to serve in public life is no easy feat, but I am sure you will agree with me when I say this, that this was a citizen who placed service above self. We will be forever grateful for his commitment, dedication and contributions in this House. Thank you very much. [*Pause*] I neglected to add, and I apologize, may his soul rest in peace.

Hon. Members, I have also directed the Clerk of House to convey our condolences in writing to the family of the late Dr. Williams, and may I invite all of you to stand for a minute's silence.

*The House of Representatives stood.*

**Mr. Speaker:** May his soul rest in peace.

**PAPERS LAID**

1. Thirty-Seventh Annual Report of the Integrity Commission of Trinidad and Tobago for the year 2024. [*The Deputy Speaker (Ms. Aiyana Ali)*]
2. Annual Report of the Office of Procurement Regulation of Trinidad and Tobago for the fiscal year 2023/2024. [*The Minister of Finance and the Minister in the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development (Hon. Davendranath Tancoo)*]
3. Executed Sector Wide Approach Programme (SWAP) Loan Agreement between the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and the Corporación Andina de Fomento to support Resilient Road Infrastructure in Trinidad and Tobago dated December 13, 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
4. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
5. Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
6. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Agricultural Development Bank of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2020. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
7. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Children's Life Fund for the year ended September 30, 2015. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
8. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Children's Authority of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2021. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]

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9. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Institute of Marine Affairs for the year ended September 30, 2012. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
10. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Institute of Marine Affairs for the year ended September 30, 2013. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
11. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Institute of Marine Affairs for the year ended September 30, 2014. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
12. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Office of Procurement Regulation for the year ended September 30, 2022. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
13. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Arima Borough Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2009. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
14. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2011. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
15. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the College of Science, Technology and Applied Arts of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2012. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
16. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Sugar Industry Labour Welfare Committee for the year ended September 30, 2008. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]

17. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Racing Authority for the year ended July 31, 2017. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
18. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Racing Authority for the year ended July 31, 2018. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
19. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Racing Authority for the year ended July 31, 2019. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
20. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Racing Authority for the year ended July 31, 2020. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
21. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Regulated Industries Commission for the year ended December 31, 2021. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
22. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Mayor's Fund of the Chaguanas Borough Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2021. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
23. Audited Financial Statements of the Water and Sewerage Authority (WASA) for the year ended September 30, 2023. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
24. Annual Report and Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Heritage and Stabilisation Fund of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the year ended September 30, 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]

25. Audited Consolidated Financial Statements of the Trinidad and Tobago Bureau of Standards and its Subsidiary for the year ended September 30, 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]  
*Papers 4 to 25 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.*
26. Audited Consolidated Financial Statements of Evolving TecKnologies and Enterprise Development Company Limited for the year ended September 30, 2020. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
27. Audited Consolidated Financial Statements of Evolving TecKnologies and Enterprise Development Company Limited for the year ended September 30, 2021. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
28. Audited Consolidated Financial Statements of Evolving TecKnologies and Enterprise Development Company Limited for the year ended September 30, 2022. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
29. Audited Financial Statements of the Youth Training and Employment Partnership Programme (YTEPP) Limited for the year ended September 30, 2022. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
30. Audited Financial Statements of Export-Import Bank of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the year ended December 31, 2023. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
31. Audited Consolidated Financial Statements of the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the year ended December 31, 2022. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
32. Audited Financial Statements of National Infrastructure Development Company Limited for the year ended September 30, 2020. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
33. Audited Financial Statements of National Schools Dietary Services Limited for the year ended September 30, 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]

34. Audited Consolidated Financial Statements of Trinidad and Tobago National Petroleum Marketing Company Limited and its Subsidiaries for the year ended March 31, 2021. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
35. Audited Consolidated Financial Statements of Trinidad and Tobago National Petroleum Marketing Company Limited and its Subsidiaries for the year ended March 31, 2022. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
36. Audited Financial Statements of East Port of Spain Development Company Limited for the year ended September 30, 2020. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
37. Audited Financial Statements of East Port of Spain Development Company Limited for the year ended September 30, 2021. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
38. Audited Financial Statements of Caroni (1975) Limited for the year ended June 30, 2022. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
39. Audited Financial Statements of Caroni (1975) Limited for the year ended June 30, 2023. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
40. Audited Consolidated Financial Statements of Urban Development Corporation of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the year ended December 31, 2021. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
41. Audited Financial Statements of Trinidad and Tobago International Financial Centre Management Company Limited for the year ended September 30, 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
42. Audited Financial Statements of Trinidad Nitrogen Company Limited for the year ended December 31, 2023. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
43. Audited Financial Statements of the Sports Company of Trinidad and Tobago Limited for the year ended September 30, 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
44. Unconsolidated Financial Statements of First Citizens Holdings Limited for the year ended September 30, 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]

45. Unconsolidated Financial Statements of Lake Asphalt of Trinidad and Tobago (1978) Limited for the year ended September 30, 2014. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
46. Unconsolidated Financial Statements of Lake Asphalt of Trinidad and Tobago (1978) Limited for the year ended September 30, 2015. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
47. Unconsolidated Financial Statements of Lake Asphalt of Trinidad and Tobago (1978) Limited for the year ended September 30, 2016. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]  
*Papers 26 to 47 to be referred to the Public Accounts [Enterprises] Committee.*
48. Report on the Management of the Seized Assets Fund for the financial year ended September 30, 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
49. Annual Report of First Citizens Investment Services Limited and its Subsidiaries for the year 2024. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]
50. Annual Administrative Report of East Port of Spain Development Company Limited for the fiscal year 2020/2021. [*The Minister of Housing (Hon. Dr. David Lee)*]
51. Annual Report of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board for the period October 1, 2022 to September 30, 2023. [*The Minister of Justice and Minister of the Ministry of the Attorney General (Hon. Devesh Maharaj)*]

**Mr. Speaker:** I now call upon the Minister of Homeland Security.

**The Minister of Homeland Security (Hon. Roger. Alexander):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I have the opportunity to lay the appointment of the Commissioner of Police and the Deputy Commissioner of Police. And, also, the notification of the President with regard to the notification of the President of Mr. Wayne Mystar to act in the office of the Deputy Commissioner of Police.

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Minister, can I respectfully require of you whether you can have recourse? You indicated to the House that you wish to lay the appointment.

Can I respectfully ask if it is the appointment or the notification you wish to refer?

**Ms. Ameen:** The notification.

**Hon. R. Alexander:** Sorry again. Mr. Speaker, I apologize.

52. Notification of Her Excellency, the President in respect of the nomination of Mr. Wayne Myster, for appointment to act in the Office of Deputy Commissioner of Police. [*The Minister of Homeland Security (Hon. Roger Alexander)*]
53. Notification of Her Excellency, the President in respect of the nomination of Mr. Allister Guevarro, for appointment to the Office of Commissioner of Police. [*(Hon. R. Alexander)*]
54. Annual Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Solid Waste Management Company Limited for the fiscal year 2018. [*The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath)*]
55. Annual Administrative Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Solid Waste Management Company Limited for the fiscal year 2019. [*Hon. B. Padarath*]
56. Annual Report of the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation for the period 2013 to 2014. [*Hon. B. Padarath*]
57. Administrative Report of the University of Trinidad and Tobago for the fiscal year 2022/2023. [*Hon. B. Padarath*]
58. Annual Report of the Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation for the period October 1 2020 to September 30, 2021. [*Hon. B. Padarath*]
59. Annual Administrative Report of exporTT Limited for the fiscal year 2017/2018. [*Hon. B. Padarath*]

1.55 p.m.

### URGENT QUESTION

#### Affected WASA Water Treatment Plants

##### (Relief Efforts for Citizens)

**Mr. Marvin Gonzales** (*Arouca/Lopinot*): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, Urgent Question No. 1 to the Minister of Public Utilities.

**The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath)**: Thank you kindly, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. Member**: You have to read it out— [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. M. Gonzales**: To the Minister of Public Utilities: In light of reports of a number of WASA's surface water treatment plants in north Trinidad and in Tobago being affected due to adverse weather conditions, can the Minister advise what relief efforts are being put in place for the citizens whose water supply has been disrupted as a result?

**The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath)**: Thank you, Mr. Speaker. I want to thank my colleague, the Member for Arouca/Lopinot for the question. But, Mr. Speaker, it is almost disgraceful if not shameless—

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

**Hon. B. Padarath**:—for the former Minister of Public Utilities to file this question knowing that they did nothing to fix the problem in the last 10 years.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath**: Having said that, Mr. Speaker, I want to tell the hon. Member what the Member for Siparia under her leadership—because they told us “leave Siparia right here” and we are leaving Siparia right here.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** I want to tell you under the leadership of the Member for Siparia, what WASA has been doing to alleviate that challenge. Mr. Speaker, right now, attendants are on standby at each one of the plants, some of the debris has been removed and I can indicate to the national population that the following plants were restored over the last 12 hours, that is in Caura, L&N, Acono, La Pastora and Guanapo.

Mr. Deputy Speaker, the WASA evolution team plans to install—Mr. Speaker, the WASA evolution team plans to install deflector plates and band screens to mitigate the problems and allow the plants to operate under adverse conditions. As I indicated, Mr. Speaker, before, this was not done in the last 10 years, and the reason the people of Trinidad and Tobago suffered in the past 48 hours was because of the inaction for 10 years of our friends opposite.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** You may go ahead, Member.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. I have to forgive my friend from Couva South because—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Ask the question, Member.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member obviously does not—

**Hon. Member:** What is the question?

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, you know much better than that. Your question cannot be framed in the form of a narrative, ask a question.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Mr. Speaker, community centres, health centres and schools are being affected at this point in time. I am asking the Member—

[*Mr. Speaker stands*]

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, the Standing Order is clear, explicit, plain and pellucid. You must know, surely, that you cannot frame a supplementary question in the form of a narrative in the form of an argument. Ask a short, crisp and concise question.

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

**Mr. Gonzales:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your guidance. I am asking the Member what is being done at this point in time to ensure that we have continuity in public service institutions like schools and hospitals in these affected communities. He has not indicated and clarified whether or not these institutions are provided with a supply of water.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Can I just say that there is no reference to schools, hospitals and community centres in the primary question.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** The rules are clear. When you ask a primary question and you are allowed to ask a supplementary question, the supplementary question must relate to the primary question.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** So the question is not allowed, Member.

### **ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS**

**The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath):** Mr. Speaker, pursuant to Standing Order 126 and with your leave, there has been agreement to allow the hon. Prime Minister to speak until the conclusion of her statement.

*Agreed to.*

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

**STATEMENT BY MINISTER**

**Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts for Financial Year  
2024**

**(Issues Arising out of this Report)**

**The Prime Minister (Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC):** Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, earlier in this Sitting, the hon. Minister of Finance pursuant to section 25(3) of the Exchequer and Audit Act laid the Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for fiscal 2024. I would like to address some of the issues arising out of this report, Report of the Auditor General on the Public Accounts for Financial Year 2024.

Mr. Speaker, I have been authorized by Cabinet to make this statement and what I am about to disclose today will trigger perhaps in some minds, some hearts, vexation, some disbelief, some outrage in right-thinking citizens. The Member for Diego Martin North/East in a very public disagreement with the Auditor General, caused a widespread disgust in the national community and in the midst of the ensuing legal drama, involving no less than the Privy Council itself, we saw and we move to ask, as did the law lord in the Privy Council, why it was that the Finance Minister then, was not being investigated for his conduct.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The conduct of this one individual whose legendary arrogance underscored a decade-long ego trip as our country's Finance Minister has left us with some reputational damage to our public finance management. As a result, Mr. Speaker, we have been unable to resolve the national accounts for two consecutive years. A very embarrassing state of affairs for any nation which prides itself on transparency, democracy and the rule of law.

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But we on this side will fix that. We will fix it.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We will fix what the PNM has broken. The situation should never have spiralled this way and if there was more astute leadership from the Finance Minister, the issues would have been very expeditiously resolved. On behalf of the citizens, all of the citizens, everybody of T&T, we demand a public apology from the former Minister of Finance.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** It is my hope that the PNM's devastating loss at the polls has made the then Minister, today the MP for Diego Martin North/East, humbler and more penitent.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This UNC administration, we hold the independence and function of the Auditor General in the highest regard as we do with all, all independent institutions.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And we are absolutely committed to stabilizing and repairing Government's working relationship with all independent constitutionally-appointed agencies to foster an environment of transparency, professionalism and cooperation.

I turn now to some of the facts laid out as I said in this report of the Auditor General. The Minister of Finance, by extension, the nation, for the second consecutive year, the Auditor General has not expressed an audit opinion on the public accounts of our Republic. As with last year's report, the Auditor General did not express an opinion, rather instead proffered a disclaimer of opinion and this forms part of the report from which I quote:

“I do not express an opinion on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ended September 30, 2024.”

This is identical to what was contained in the report previously, that is the 2023 report. Because of the significance of the matters described in the basis for the “Disclaimer of Opinion” section of the report, the Auditor General continues:

“...I have not been able to obtain sufficient appropriate audit evidence to provide a basis for an audit opinion on the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.”

What a shameful state of affairs. What a shameful state of affairs.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Those words are found at page 9 of the report which I shared with you, the 2024 audit report.

What this means then, is that the Auditor General could not verify, validate or approve the accounts of the Government for two consecutive years. In the “Basis for Disclaimer of Opinion”, the Auditor General gives several very troubling reasons why she was led to put in such a disclaimer. One such example was the Auditor General’s inability to examine the Electronic Cheque Clearing System and GoAnywhere Platform managed by the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago.

I want to quote from page 10 of this report, the Auditor General’s Report and I quote:

“The Permanent Secretary, Ministry of Finance gave authorisation for the examination of the “Electronic Cheque Clearing System and the GoAnywhere Platform’ managed by the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago...related to Government’s transactions.”

And despite that, the Auditor General could not be given access to these.

“Despite the scope of the examination being confined to Government issued cheques, the Central Bank further restricted the scope which frustrated the”—entire—“examination process.”

What did you have to hide? Why did you restrict the Auditor General from doing her job?

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** What was the cover up? We still do not know where the \$2.3 billion from the previous year went. We still do not know and this is not your money, this was taxpayers’ money of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

**Mr. Tancoo:** Correct.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**

“Approval by the Central Bank to conduct the examination was not given. Hence the examination was not conducted.

The restriction imposed by the Central Bank obstructed the ability to gain assurance on the reliability of data from the Electronic Cheque Clearing System and the GoAnywhere Platform since its implementation.

Consequently, the completeness, reliability, integrity, validity and accuracy of the Public Accounts of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago could not be ascertained.”

I say what a shameless state of affairs. Shameless state of affairs.

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

**2.10 p.m.**

Other impediments cited by the Auditor General include, prior period errors could not be verified, issues regarding the statement of loans or credits guaranteed

by the State, questions relating to the statement of public debt, omissions relating to the statements of off-balance sheet financing, inability of the staff at the Auditor General's department to gain the relevant access to the Ministry of Education, and supporting documents were not provided to verify payments. As a result, some expenditure of \$1.5 billion could not be verified; \$1.5 billion of taxpayers' money could not be verified. I am not saying this. This is contained in the report of the Auditor General.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Mr. Speaker, this is just one aspect of the fiscal mayhem we inherited from the previous regime.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And there is more, as a perusal of the report will reveal.

I will turn, however, to some other matters of concern contained in this report. I turn to the whole issue of rentals and leases by government Ministries and departments from themselves maybe, from himself to himself, all the recusals that took place to allow these things to happen, hundreds of recusals in the Parliament. I will share some of them with you.

Rent paid for properties leased by the Government of T&T for the financial year was \$493,209,274.63. We are talking here about almost \$5 billion. Is that correct? I am not the mathematical—493,209,274; 493 million. Almost \$500 million in rentals.

**Hon. Member:** Half a billion.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Half a billion dollars—thank you all—gone into payment of rents, and rentals, and so on. On the face, nothing is really wrong with that. If we do not have the facilities, well then, that is fine. Well, let us see where

this money went.

The audit could not verify the accuracy of this figure for these reasons: The master list shows 237 properties were rented by the Government, of which 212, 90 per cent of rented properties, were without current leases. They did not have a lease; no lease. Most of the leases had expired, and hear this, for about a decade. Not expired last year or the year before, eh. Year upon year, expired leases, and we continued—taxpayers' dollars—always remember that, you know. It is not your money. It is not mine. It belongs to everybody of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Rent paid by Ministries and departments, hear this, they did not agree with the figures on the master list. They did not agree—the rent they said they paid does not agree with the figures on the master list. There were huge differences between what was paid by Ministries and government departments and what should have been paid according to the master list.

So, who were the persons or companies getting this? Hear it again. There were huge differences between what was paid by the Ministries and departments and what should have been paid according to the master list. Departments paying, but nothing is matching. There was a variance of total rent paid by Ministries and departments of \$208,304,525; remains unexplained. The variance remains unexplained. A difference, again, of \$208 million.

Some properties rented by the Government, and for which rent was paid by Ministries and departments, were not shown on the master list. This raised concerns of the accuracy and completeness of the master list. Current status of 90 per cent of the rentals shown on the master list read, three-year lease has since expired; expired leases.

Currently, on the monthly tenancy, 90 per cent of these leases had expired for over a decade, and the rent paid differed significantly from what is shown on the master list. Total rent paid, as shown on the appropriation accounts of Ministries and departments of \$493 million, and some others were about \$493 million, could not be verified; could not be verified as the rent amounts paid were not supported by documentation.

Discrepancies of over \$10 million in rent paid, in respect of the appropriation accounts of five Ministries and departments for the year, when compared with the master list. Again, so what were we paying for? To whom were we paying it? And why was there not proper accountability and transparency?

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Ten properties occupied by government departments, Ministries without leases were more than \$5 million a year in rent paid. A listing of this is shown in chapter 2, subparagraph 2.55 in the Auditor General's report. Let us turn to that please, Mr. Speaker, with your leave, chapter 2, looking at paragraph 2.54 and then 2.55, dealing with rentals and so on, of properties

This is paragraph 2.54:

“Discrepancies of over \$10 million in rent paid for the year as shown below:”

- Judiciary, rent paid, appropriation account, \$30-plus million; rent on the master list, 8.9—about \$8.9 million.
- Ministry of Finance, rent paid, appropriation account, \$38.6 million; rent on the master list, \$13.7 million.

Were these ghost rentals? What was happening? So, in the appropriation

accounts—well, we have ghost gangs, I am coming to that in a minute. We have appropriation accounts, and then the moneys actually paid, it does not match, the discrepancies, the variance there.

- Ministry of Health, rent paid, appropriation account, \$49.3 million; rent on the master list, \$1.4 million.

How could there ever have been these vast discrepancies happening there?

- Ministry of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, on the appropriation account, \$13.1million; rent paid on the master list, \$2.4 million.
- Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, rent on the appropriation account, \$31.9 million; but on the master list, only \$459,000.

Let me share some more with you. Out of paragraph 2.55, in chapter 2, page 47 of the report, location of property without current leases where more than \$5 million a year in rent was paid.

Ministry of Planning and Development, CSO: No. 47 Frederick Street, Port of Spain, \$13 million, no lease.

Ministry of Social Development and Family Services: 39-43, St. Vincent Street, Port of Spain, about \$9.8 million paid.

Coming down to the Ministry of Public Utilities: No. 1 Alexandra Street—I think we all know where that is, No. 1 Alexandra Street, rent paid, \$8.1 million; again, leases expired, no lease—no current leases.

Personnel Department: No. 3 Alexandra Street—I think we all know where that rental went. No. 1 Alexandra and No. 3 Alexandra, sitting in a Cabinet and recusing himself, revolving door policy, in and out.

**Hon. Member:** And brought back as a Senator

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And brought back as a Senator.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And brought back as a Senator. Shame, Shame. No. 3 Alexandra Street, \$7.7 million paid; no lease.

Ministry of Trade and Industry: Independence Square, \$7.6 million; no lease. Service Commissions: 59-61 Cipriani Boulevard, \$6.9 million in rent.

Ministry of Finance, Valuation Division: Estate Trace, Barataria, \$6.9 million. I wonder if the MP for Barataria/San Juan has an idea of where this building is, because I will come back to it in a minute. I will come back and you will tell me what is happening there. I will be very grateful. Ministry of Finance, Valuation Division, as I said, no lease; \$6.9 million.

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Well, that is what I am hoping Barataria will tell us, and is it occupied?

**Hon. Member:** There is a recusal for that.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Yes, there was a recusal for that as well. A Cabinet of recusals.

Ministry of Trade and Industry: Independence Square, \$7.6 million. Service Commissions: 59-61 Cipriani Boulevard, \$6.9 million. I said the Valuation Division. I am repeating some of these, I am sorry, but back down to Estate Trace, Barataria.

Ministry of Housing: 44-46 South Quay, Port of Spain—I wonder if the former Ministers in Housing know to whom this belongs. Here we are paying over \$6 million, no lease.

Office of the Attorney General and Legal Affairs: 134 Henry Street, \$5.8 million, no lease.

Ministry of Labour: 50-54 Duke Street, Port of Spain, \$5.1 million.

I turn now to page 48 as it continues, paragraph 2.56:

“The master list provided by the Ministry of Public Administration show that two (2) companies were paid over \$15 million per...”—year—“...for three properties each rented by Government, without any current lease...’—and hear what—“without any Cabinet approval.”

No lease, and no Cabinet approval, and two companies I am talking about; two.

Company one, Estate Trace, Barataria—back to Estate Trace, Barataria, \$6.9 million rent paid, lease expired, not seen. Corner of El Socorro Road, Jattan Lane, \$4.5 million, lease expired since 2014. Mr. Speaker, 51-55 Henry Street, Port of Spain, \$3.6 million; July 01 2018, the lease expired. So, here we have one company with its three locations being rented for over \$15 million.

Company two—remember I told you at the start of the report, two companies paid over \$15 million per year, and were rented by the Government with no current lease or Cabinet approval. Company two, No. 1 Alexandra Street, Port of Spain location, over \$8 million, the lease expired since July 2019. Corner of Agra and Patna Street, St. James, rent over \$4.8 million, lease expired and no Cabinet approval, April 30, 2017. Mr. Speaker, 45 A-C St. Vincent Street, \$2.1 million paid; July 31<sup>st</sup>, lease expired and no Cabinet approval. So, we have two companies, each getting over \$15 million each, making it to about \$30 million being paid, the lease has expired and no Cabinet approval.

There were 10 properties occupied where current leases were more than \$5 million, and a listing is in, as I said, chapter 2, paragraphs 2.54, 2.55, and 2.56. The master list provided by the Ministry of Public Administration showed that two companies were paid over \$15 million, and I just listed the properties for you, rented by the Government, no Cabinet approval, and no current leases. It was a free-for-all. It was a feeding frenzy of epic proportions at the expense of the

taxpayers of our country, facilitated by whom? The PNM Government of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I mentioned Estate Trace twice because this was one of the higher rentals without leases, without Cabinet approval, and I am now being advised that the then Minister, Mr. Faris Al-Rawi, recused himself from the Cabinet on March 02, 2017, for Estate Trace, Barataria. So, it is Alexandra No. 1, Alexandra No. 3, Estate Trace, and we will find these, you know. We will share it with you because I am giving you what is given here.

**2.25 p.m.**

So, everybody else in the country zero per cent, 4 per cent but you are sitting down—1 per cent too—in the Cabinet, walking through, in and out helping your friends, your financiers and your family. It is disgusting and disgraceful.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That is why on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April you got the licking that you deserved.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I turn to another area in that report dealing with—we talked about ghost rentals, ghost landlords, ghost leases, ghost Cabinet approvals, now I am talking about short term employment. Where are the ghost gangs, all the ghost gangs? Let us talk about this from the auditor's report. This is not Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC, MP, speaking, this is from the auditor's report.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The auditor tells us in her report:

Short term employment is defined as in the Estimates of Expenditure as short term or revolving employment in specific government departments and

agencies where each employee's term does not exceed six months.

That is the definition. Does not exceed what? Six months. Keep that in your minds please as we continue on this. For the year 2024, fiscal 24, \$350,011,116.54 was spent on what? Short term employment. That is over \$350 million. To whom did these short term contracts go to? And that is why I must give credit to the PSA. Give credit to the PSA—

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—and others, others who helped craft the workers' agenda. But this contracting of persons is another kind of slavery. You cannot get a mortgage, you cannot get a loan to buy a car because you are on short term contract. Not even a credit card I am being told. So, \$350 million on short-term employment and I say, I give praise to the workers who partnered with us because they brought the workers' agenda close to our hearts.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And in this fiscal year, it represented an increase from the previous years of expenditure. So, they increase the short term contract money this year, why? Because it was an election year, let us be real, let us be real. An election year hiring persons for three months, three months to do what? Electioneering. But it did not help you, it still did not help you.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The auditor's report tells us the eight Ministries and departments spending over \$15 million under this vote of short-term employment is set out in paragraph 255 in the report of the Auditor General, eight Ministries and departments. As they follow from last year's audit report, a memo was sent to the Chief Personnel Officer on a policy directive which governs recruitment of persons under short-term employment. The response from the

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC (cont'd)

CPO—Auditor tells us—advised that the CPO is not the employer for persons engaged on short-term in the public service. The authority to employ persons in short-term administrative arrangements resides with accounting officers across government Ministries, departments, agencies. So the CPO washed their hands out of this. And you know why? Because we know why. This is what they were doing. Short-term contracts keep you on a string so you have to do their bidding because you want the contract get renewed for a next short-term. Keep you in a form of perpetual slavery. That is what has been going on.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Auditor says further, whilst audit was unaware of a policy directive which governed recruitment of persons on short-term employment, it was noted that there were many instances of persons being kept on for continuous periods exceeding the six months. This is contrary the auditor tells us to good industrial relations practices and exposes the Government to liability. There was no accountability and no attempt to put any measures in place to provide accountability, procedures or transparency. This was a classic case of jobs for the boys and girls. Again, who is paying for it? All the taxpayers of Trinidad and Tobago, all, everybody taxpayers expense. And, so, no wonder there has been so many allegations about needing a PNM party card to get a job, we saw it on social media. People were being bullied and forced in order to get these little crumbs of short-term contracts.

I turn to security services. Again, the cost of security services for Ministries and departments for the year total \$491 million, over \$491 million, according to appropriation accounts. Well, this figure—

**Hon. Member:** Half a billion.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Half a billion, thank you Minister. This figure

could not be verified since contract agreements, so much cannot be verified. What were you all running? A parlour on a corner, on a junction somewhere?

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** From a parlour you were running up billions of dollars. This figure could not be verified since contract agreements for the provision of security service were not seen to support 84 per cent of the total expenditure incurred.

**Hon. Member:** Shameful.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And the Auditor does give some proposed solutions. These are just some of the issues, there is much, much, more which we will—it is public from today and everybody will have access to it, all those who wish to see it can see it, some issues. I assure you, Mr. Speaker, this Government together with the hardworking staff in the various Ministries, we have a deep and abiding regard for our Constitution. We know what the problems are and together we will fix them.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I pledge to facilitate the Auditor General's department in the conduct of their lawful duties with the highest levels of professional courtesy and integrity, and as long as there has been government, people have expectations, and rightfully so. And I want to share something with you, I read in the newspaper where comments are coming that the Auditor General is not the auditor of the Central Bank accounts. Well, I am going to advise you to read the law. And I am going to instruct the Minister of Finance to use the law so the Auditor General who was not able to do the accounts and auditing for 2024 fiscal, that auditor can do so now because the Minister has the power under the law.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So, do not threaten us. I am telling you we will use the law to fix a broken T&T. We will use the law to do what is right in the interest of all the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Do not threaten us. I will call no names but those who sit in their ivory towers, start reading the law. And if you cannot, we have some good lawyers [*Laughter*] we can lend them to you. So, here we are, Central Bank Act says:

“Accounts, Reports and Statistics.

51. Bank’s financial year.

The financial year of the bank shall coincide with the financial year of the Government.

52. Accounts and audits.

(1) The accounts of the Bank shall be audited annually by auditors who shall be appointed by the Board each year with the approval of” whom—the Minister.

(2) Notwithstanding...”—52(1)—“... the Minister may at any time require the Auditor General to examine and report...the accounts of the Bank and the Bank shall”—not may the bank shall, it is mandatory, the bank shall—“provide the Auditor General with all necessary and appropriate facilities for...”—an—“examination.”

Minister of Finance is instructed and advised to utilize section 52 to send in the Auditor General into the Central Bank.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Do not hide the accounts. Do not hide the accounts. So do not come and tell me the Auditor General is not your auditor, well maybe that was under section what was it, 52(1). And even then when you hide, even when you said the Auditor General is not your auditor, is it that you had another auditor but you can only have done so with the concurrence of whom? The Minister of Finance. Who was the then Minister of Finance.

**Hon. Dr. Moonilal:** Ahaa!!

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Which firm did they take instead of utilizing the services of the constitutionally appointed office of the Auditor General? Let us find that out. Whom did you hire and where are those audited accounts? Who were the auditors? And with this government everything was friend, family and financiers you know. So we may find another recusal in the Cabinet to find out who recused and why they recused and which firm was hired. So, Minister of Finance, you have your job, here it is, 52, send in the Auditor General. Let us find out where the money of people of Trinidad and Tobago disappeared. Let us find out how it was spent, let us find out how it was spent.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** As I close, our commitment to accountability is not only about adhering to laws and regulation, it is also about expanding a culture that is receptive to oversight, and in this regard, my Ministers, myself, Members of our Government we are leading from the front.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Each week we make ourselves available for the post-cab presser. Different one sometimes, I think they really missed me yesterday. I saw somebody crying and saying, "Oh the Prime Minister did not go to the post-cab presser yesterday". What did they mean? I was still in Cabinet, we

were still in Cabinet but out of—

**Hon. Members:** Working.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—working. And out of courtesy, we sent three Ministers to give accounting, but I guess they felt they were missing me. I think they were missing me. I commend our three Ministers out there: Minister Khadijah Ameen, Minister John, Minister Saddam Hosein.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Brilliant job, and you will see our Ministers always coming to account. So, we move on, each week then we offer Ministers, our MPs, Members, public scrutiny at the post-cab conferences, accounting to the nation and answering questions. And as it is with government policy so it is with public finance. In no uncertain terms, we have made it clear that there will be no secrecy when it comes to the management of taxpayers' money. On April 28<sup>th</sup> 2025, the citizens of our great nation voted overwhelmingly for positive change and our landslide victory ensured that we can now put an end to the private deals and confidential payouts using public finances.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And as I have said before, it is not a defence to plead and cry privacy when taxpayers' money is being spent.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** There will be no defence of privacy rights when you are using taxpayers' dollars. So wherever it is, we will find you, we will expose you and we will let the people of Trinidad and Tobago see where their money is going, how it is going, we will be accountable. So, I am putting everyone on notice.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** It will not be business as usual under our administration. Over the past decade, under this PNM regime, certain officials have been labouring under the mistaken assumption that they own the Treasury. And they do not have to account for what they have been doing with the nation's taxpayers' money. I say again, unlike the PNM, we on this side understand it is not our money. This is the people's money and giving an account of how we have been managing their funds is not an option, it is mandatory. Learning from past mistakes is critical to having remedial efforts. As we move forward, we must ensure that the fiscal wrongdoings, and the fiscal, all those things fiscally of the past nine years are not repeated. Diego Martin North/East's decade-long tenure as Finance Minister, with the greatest of respect I say, is a master class in mistakes.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Our plan now is to do better. The UNC was founded on the premise of creating a nation that is not only prosperous but also just and fair. Therefore, we hold ourselves to the high standards of accountability and transparency to ensure that national resources are used effectively that the entire nation from Trinidad to Tobago, from north, south, east, west and central prospers. I say again, Mr. Speaker, when the UNC wins, everybody wins.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** As I close, Mr. Speaker, it is time for people of this nation to win back confidence in their public officials and we will do all that is humanly possible by being accountable to them. Mr. Speaker, I thank you very much.

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

**2.40 p.m.**

**Mr. Imbert:** Point of order, Mr. Speaker, 24(4).

**Mr. Speaker:** One question will be permitted, pursuant to 24(4). I do not think I need to remind the experienced Members of this House the very narrow parameters of a question pursuant to 24(4).

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, regarding the statement made by the hon. Prime Minister, in particular references to property rentals, is the hon. Prime Minister aware that many of the rentals that are of concern to the hon. Prime Minister were commenced by the UNC Government in the period 2010 to 2015, including the building in Barataria for which the UNC Government paid \$41 million without occupying it?

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

**Mr. Speaker:** That is why I referred to the very narrow. For the benefit of members of the public who are looking on, so that this does not appear to be a perfunctory exercise of power, the Standing Order says that the question shall not exceed 15 seconds, which you have offended, but that is proportionate. It must be asked without argument or opinion and shall not address more than one matter of general Government policy. So, can I invite you, Member, to please ask your question?

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Behave. Calm down, everyone. Calm down. In a proportionate exercise of discretion, I am inviting the Member to ask a question which complies with the conditions of 24(4) and to please refrain from argument, opinion, narrative and confine yourself to one issue. Those are the rules. I did not make them.

**Mr. Imbert:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. With respect to the rental properties that the hon. Prime Minister has complained about, is the Prime Minister aware one of those properties was rented by the UNC for \$41 million without occupying it?

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East, I invite you to read the report. I invite you to read the report. I invite you to read the report.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I invite you to read the report. I further invite you to seek—

**Mr. Imbert:** You cannot answer.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I will respond. The answer is no. The answer is no. You have been there for nine years. Read the report and seek deliverance. Thank you very much.

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

### **CHILDREN'S LIFE FUND (AMDT.) BILL, 2025**

Bill to amend the Children's Life Fund Act, Chap. 29:01 to expand the category of applicants who may qualify for a grant thereunder by the introduction of a new Schedule 3 which list life threatening illnesses, as well as to introduce a mechanism to allow the Minister of Health to review a decision of the Board of Management of the Children's Life Fund Authority where an application has been rejected for a grant under the Act.

*Motion made:* That the next stage be taken at a later stage of the proceedings. [*Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO REVENUE AUTHORITY**

#### **(REPEAL) BILL, 2025**

Bill to repeal the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, 2021 (Act No. 17 of 2021).

*Motion made:* That the next stage be taken at a later stage of the proceedings. [*Hon. D. Tancoo*]

*Question put and agreed to.*

**POLICE SERVICE COMMISSION  
(NOMINATION OF ALLISTER GUEVARRO)**

**The Minister of Homeland Security (Hon. Roger Alexander):** Mr. Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion standing 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 offices 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 Mr. Allister Guevarro for appointment to the office of Commissioner of Police;

*And whereas* the President has on the 9th day of May, 2025 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 Mr. Allister Guevarro to the office of Commissioner of Police be approved.

I beg to move.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, before you beg to move the Motion, can I enquire as to whether you have a contribution in the Motion?

**Hon. R. Alexander:** Yes, Sir.

**Mr. Speaker:** Proceed to do so now if you do.

**Hon. R. Alexander:** Yes, Sir. Thank you, Mr Speaker. Mr Speaker, Mr Allister Guevarro is a leader in law enforcement and security in Trinidad and Tobago. He has a wealth of knowledge and has a proven track record in law enforcement. Mr Guevarro has a Master's in Business Administration, leadership, entrepreneurial skills and innovation, from the Anglia Ruskin University. His dissertation was "Disruptive confluence: A critical analysis of structural design in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service."

Further, he has training from the University of Cambridge in evidence-based policing. He also had training at the Arthur Lok Jack Graduate School of Business in Environmental Criminology and Crime Analysis, and also from the Cipriani College of Labour and Cooperative Studies in Security Administration and Management.

Mr. Guevarro has also participated in specialist training from special organizations including the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Centre, the United Nations Office for Counter-Terrorism, the International Criminal Policing Organization, the Federal Criminal Police Office in Germany and the United States Department.

Mr. Guevarro has 27 years' service in the Trinidad and Tobago Police

Service, having joined the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service (TTPS) in 1998 as a police constable in the Special Branch. He moved up the ranks to corporal, sergeant, inspector, assistant superintendent and currently superintendent of police. Although he spent most of his career in the Special Branch, he has experience in intelligence gathering; analysis, supervision and maintenance of staff; surveillance training of officers in various areas, including intelligence gathering and covert operations, discipline, and the maintenance of resources, including human, vehicles and specialized equipment.

Mr. Guevarro has served on several key national and international law enforcement committees, including the Cabinet-appointed expert committee on the national power outage threat risk assessment in the energy sector; also on the Ministerial Committee of the Forensic Science Centre, international security and recruitment vulnerabilities; committees of the national counter-terrorism policy; also the joint task force on counter-terrorism; also the Trinidad and Tobago Joint Task Force on Human Trafficking; the Trinidad and Tobago Intelligence and Covert Operations Committee; the Law Enforcement Agency Committee of the Commonwealth Secretariat Working Group on Returnees.

Mr. Guevarro has also authored and co-authored several pivotal policy and investigative documents such as “Threat, risk and vulnerability assessment of the national security apparatus”, April 2024; Cabinet report on the island-wide power outage on April 2022; ”Threat assessment of the Generation, Transmission and Distribution of Electricity in Trinidad and Tobago”, March 2022; revision of security processes at the Forensic Science Centre, October 2021; terrorist incident response procedure, 2015, now adopted by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

His service has earned him multiple awards and commendations including

commendations for dedication and devotion to duty and astute leadership; commendations and monetary awards for dedication and devotion to duty, painstaking investigations, and covert operations which led to the first ever seizure of dangerous drugs, ketamine valued over \$8 million and the arrest of several foreign nationals and also part of the transnational crime syndicate.

**2.55 p.m.**

Commendation for special projects commissioned by the Ministry of National Security, which led to the seizure of large quantities of contraband at the maximum security prison, and the arrest of several persons relating to prison smuggling, as well as the recommendation of standing operating procedures, and successful execution of policy objectives which have reduced the aforementioned acts.

Awards of high commendation for outstanding work in discovering and dismantling contraband smuggling in the southwestern peninsula, and the southern coastline. National Security Officers Foundation; National Security Awards for dedication and devotion to duty; Community Service Award by the Santa Maria community, Moruga, for outstanding and significant contribution to the community. Selflessness, dedication and commitment to improving the lives of others.

TTPS Special Branch Outstanding Officers Award for dedication, commitment, and loyalty to covert operations which led to the discovery and dismantling of illegal firearms armory in the Southern Division. I commend the House to consider and reflect on Her Excellency's notification of the Police Service Commission's recommendation of Mr. Allister Guevarro for Commissioner of Police. I beg to move.

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

*Question proposed.*

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Member for Arouca/Lopinot.

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

**Mr. Marvin Gonzales** (*Arouca/Lopinot*): Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we have been through these debates on many occasions in the last Parliament, and I am pretty certain that if we do not make the appropriate amendments to our Constitution, we would be going through many of these debates in this Parliament.

I want to start by asking the Government, that we take this opportunity as we debate this Motion, to examine the aspects of our Constitution as it relates to the appointment of a Commissioner, and Deputy Commissioner of Police because I have heard the Hon. Prime Minister make some statements in the national media, if it was captured accurately, that perhaps the Government may be open to certain constitutional amendments to make the appointment of a Commissioner, and Deputy Commissioner more in alignment with what we may believe, Mr. Speaker, to be a seamless one that can ensure that the Police Service operates seamlessly without interruption.

**Mr. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, Standing order 48(1), we are dealing with a notification for the Office of Commissioner of Police, we are not dealing with process today.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** I myself, was wondering about the relevance. The Motion, if I could read it back, it says:

*“Be it resolved that the Notification of the President...be approved.”*

So, I would ask Members on both sides, all those who are willing to contribute, and intending to contribute, please confine your observations and your

contributions to the question which is before the House. What may or may not be notional, underlying notions of resolving the law, or amending the law, perhaps is for another debate or another forum. As of now, there is one core question for the House. So perhaps we should confine ourselves to the core question which is before the House.

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

**Mr. M. Gonzales:** Just framing my contribution in this debate, on this matter that is before us.

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Allister Guevarro is a Senior Superintendent of Police in the Special Branch. He is a career police officer, as the Member for Tunapuna, and the Minister of Homeland Security would have indicated, 27 years' service in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service in the Special Branch. If members of the public would have listened to the hon. Minister as he read out the CV of the officer, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago would no doubt believe that the officer who is being recommended to fill the position of Commissioner of Police is one who has served Trinidad and Tobago as a career police officer in a commendable way with an unblemished record.

Mr. Speaker, as you are aware, that this process ensures continuity and stability in the management of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, therefore, the Opposition would have absolutely no objection to the recommendation by Her Excellency the President, to allow Mr. Guevarro to fill the position of Commissioner of Police. I did not get from the Member who spoke before me whether it is the intention of the Government to approve the notification, but I wish to state at this point in time, Mr. Speaker, that the Opposition has absolutely no objection in the recommendation by Her Excellency, the President.

I do not wish to be repetitious, Mr. Speaker, because the hon. Member

would have read from the CV of the candidate, and I too was prepared to make reference to some of the great work that the officer would have performed during his service in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. I recognize that he has performed most of his duties in the Special Branch with expert experience in intelligence gathering. One that is absolutely necessary and required, and especially given the challenges faced by the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service in the fight against crime. If this notification is approved Mr. Speaker, it is Mr. Guevarro's responsibility as Commissioner of Police to lead his charges in the Police Service in the fight against crime to ensure that all citizens feel a sense of safety, and comfort in their homes, in their communities. It is his responsibility.

And whilst yes, we as parliamentarians and legislators have a responsibility to do what we must insofar as it relates to our constitutional mandate, this Opposition will recommend the notification and approve the notification of the President with absolutely no hesitation, reminding the officer that if this Parliament approves the notification, we depend on him, and we depend on all police officers, and those who give of their life on a daily basis in the discharge of their duties in the Police Service, that we depend on them with the support of their Commissioner to ensure that all citizens exist in this country with a sense of safety and peace in their communities. Oftentimes, Mr. Speaker, we get the sense that it is the role of the Minister, it is the role of parliamentarians to go out into the streets, and to enforce laws, but it is debates and Motions like these that remind citizens that persons are appointed in constitutional positions who are responsible for discharging their duties to protect the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Guevarro, Mr. Speaker, during my career as a parliamentarian, I have had the opportunity to speak to him on two or three occasions, and I can say in the discharge of my constitutional duties, and I must say, Mr. Speaker, that I find him

to be very professional in the discharge of his duties. Therefore—yes, very professional, and therefore, I believe that he is a worthy candidate to fill the position of Commissioner of Police in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

I will also take the opportunity to let him know that we expect him to continue to discharge his duties professionally, and independently, especially when you have so many people occupying high offices in Trinidad and Tobago who are subject to the law, and therefore we depend on a duly constituted and appointed Commissioner of Police to go in there, manage the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service in the way that we expect him to, to guard and protect the Constitution, and to lead law enforcement in such a way that we the citizens can feel a sense of safety and comfort.

We examined his CV, Mr. Speaker, I have seen, and the Opposition has seen absolutely nothing that can point to any concern that we may have that we can use this floor of Parliament to express those concerns. He is a career law enforcement official spending over 27 years, most of those years in the Special Branch of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service, and I expect that with his experience in the Special Branch that he will lead the effort for the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service to work with all of its counterpart agencies in the region, and internationally to ensure that we fight crime, because crime cannot be only fought on local soils but it can only be done successfully when we coordinate our resources, and our intelligence gathering capacity with other law enforcement agencies in the region, and internationally.

I expect that with someone with Mr. Guevarro's capacity and experience that he will lead the Police Service to have that level of confidence with other counterpart agencies in the region and internationally so that the necessary information can be gathered where it is needed in the fight against crime and

criminality in Trinidad and Tobago. He is a good candidate, and the Opposition has absolutely no objection to the recommendations of the President. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Before I call on the hon. Prime Minister who has caught my eye, it was remiss of me not to acknowledge the Member for Tunapuna who would have made his maiden contribution.

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

**3.10 p.m.**

**Mr. Speaker:** Perhaps the ease with which he made his contribution lulled me to think he was perhaps more experienced than this was his first time.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** So I contribute that. Hon. Prime Minister.

**The Prime Minister (Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Mr. Speaker. I am happy to join this debate to discuss and debate the notification of Her Excellency the President with respect to Mr. Allister Guevarro as Commissioner of Police.

Mr. Speaker, sometimes I wonder if people have very short memories, because when I listened to the hon. Member, who was very nice, and kind, and smiling, from Arouca/Lopinot, I wondered if he forgot he was there in that Government for five years. I wondered if he is now recently vacating the office of national security and therefore, all the advice and the hopes and dreams, where were they for all those years you were sitting in that Government? Where were they?

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** National Security, but you were on the Bench, you were part of the Government. You are all in it together, you know. It is one shebang, all of you. You cannot separate from each other.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** For the nine years, you allowed it, Sir. So whilst I can hear some people call it “bleeding heart” words today, where was the bleeding heart over the years when so many persons were murdered in our country? So many home invasions, extortion, crime rose to astronomical levels. So I will leave the Minister in dreamland, hoping he would get out of there soon and admit they did nothing in the fight against crime.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Nothing, nothing, nothing.

So, today, I think is a very important day for all of us for more than one reason, to debate this notification. The appointment here that we are discussing marks a very significant day for everybody in our Republic, because why? Crime affects every single person; everybody. We begin today discussing, finding the most suitable and proper person to whom we will give responsibility for the safety and security of our citizens.

As your Prime Minister, I am fully aware that making this decision correctly is one of the principal reasons that you elected us into office, because you were concerned about crime, and whereas the Commissioner of Police will be the person in charge, mainly for helping us deal with crime in the country. The people of the country spoke loudly, I say again, on April 28<sup>th</sup>. They expressed their dissatisfaction with the people who have held the offices of national security and some as Commissioner of Police during these nine years. They failed to deliver

what everybody is constitutionally entitled to, and that is what? Safety and security. They failed to keep our citizens safe and secure. They failed to effectively and efficiently manage the organization entrusted with the duty to keep our citizens safe.

Mr. Speaker, you may or may not know that the last Government spent more than \$66 billion on national security; \$66 billion. During that time, our country, our citizens, as I say again, everyone was more unsafe than at any other time in our history.

**Mr. de Nobriga:** Mr. Speaker, 48(1).

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. de Nobriga:** By the same ruling, 48(1).

**Mr. Speaker:** Which aspect of 48(1) are you on, Member?

**Mr. de Nobriga:** Mr. Speaker, the same aspect that you raised with the Chief Whip, relevance.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** If you look at 48(1), it is a compendious Standing Order. Identify which part of the Standing Order it is offending. If you tell me that, then perhaps—

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** 48(1) is relevance.

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

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** It is only relevance.

**Mr. de Nobriga:** Mr. Speaker, the Standing Order refers to relevance.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Exactly.

**Mr. Speaker:** So you are only on the basis of relevance?

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

**Mr. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, can I ask my friend from Diego Martin Central

whether he is saying the Member for Arouca/Lopinot is irrelevant?

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Let us calm down, please. Let us move forward with grace, dignity and calm on both sides, and let us not invoke the Standing Orders where they do not apply. Relevance is a contextual exercise. We all know that. You are entitled to lay a foundation, or as we say in cricketing terms, some of us may or may not be aware, you are entitled to take a “run-up” before you deliver your ball, a short one at that.

So whatever relevance, if you are bordering on irrelevancy, it may be tolerated for a short while, but only for the purpose of laying the relevant foundation. So, please, let us not invoke Standing Orders where the invocation simply does not arise. Time—we are wasting time. The baseline premise of all is that parliamentary time is precious. So let us move on, please. Prime Minister, you can move on but please keep it short.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you. Thank you, again, Mr. Speaker. And if you cannot see why this is relevant, that is why you are now sitting on that side and we are on this side.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You cannot come and tell me it is irrelevant to talk about how much money was spent in a context where we are now at an all-time high with crime. In a context where we are now attempting to seek the best person to deal with the crime.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So it was not just about money. It was not just about the \$66 billion you spent and failed to address the crime. So, I will take your

guidance, Mr. Speaker. And I say, again, if you do not know the relevance of what we are speaking about, you deserve to be perpetually in Opposition.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So \$66 billion, everybody was unsafe. And so, in 2016—I want show you the pattern to see how the crime—remember when we said, when the UNC is in office—

**Mr. Imbert:** Point of order, Mr. Speaker, point of order.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—the crime always goes down.

**Mr. Imbert:** Point of order.

**Mr. Speaker:** The Member is on his legs.

**Mr. Imbert:** Thank you very much. Mr. Speaker, 48(1) indicates the:

“...Member shall confine his observations to the subject under discussion.”  
 —which is the notification from the President.

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

**Mr. Imbert:** It is not an opportunity for the Member to go into a wide-ranging speech on what they did about crime, what we did about crime and so on. It is the notification from the President.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** As I have said before, relevance is a contextual exercise; anyone knows that. I see the Member for Port of Spain South smiling gleefully, but relevance is a contextual exercise. You are entitled to set the stage for an argument you may wish to make and set the context in which you are saying it. The Member has set out the context as to why the expenditure is relevant. I have ruled that a short run-up is to be given before that ball is delivered. This is not going to be a Michael Holding run-up.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** You can trust me on that. As graceful as it may sound and look, it is not going to be a Michael Holding run-up. Rather, it is going to be a very short run-up of a spinner's run-up. Okay? So the leeway afforded is a very short leeway. So I am afraid that the over-reliance on, and perhaps sometimes sterile reliance on relevance, may seem to be misplaced and/or misguided in this instance. So, again, let us continue briefly on that point.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So we are here to consider Mr. Allister Guevarro, whether we should agree with the notification to appoint him as the Commissioner of Police. But it is very important that we understand that the skills and the techniques that are to be utilized to keep us safe and secure, to keep our citizens safe and secure, it is not just about money, because the last Government spent all the money, \$66 billion. And you know what happened? I tell you, Mr. Speaker, when the UNC is in government the crime always goes down.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** When the PNM is in government, the crime always goes up. Remember that.

**Mr. Imbert:** Point of order, Mr. Speaker. Point of order.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And so our duty is to bring crime down, and that is why—

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

**Mr. Speaker:** The Member is on his legs.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This can go on for the whole evening. You had your turn for 10 years and you failed.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Come on, come on. Let us—[*Inaudible*]

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

**Mr. Imbert:** I cannot speak above the noise, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Speaker:** I fully understand. Can you go ahead now?

**Mr. Imbert:** Yes. I did not use the word “relevance” in my point of order. I used the precise wording of the Standing Order, which is—

**Hon. Member:** What is the Standing Order?

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Can we allow the Member to speak and make his point, please?

**Mr. Imbert:**—which is 48(1):

The—“...Member...”—must—“...confine his”—or her—“observations to the subject under discussion.”

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

**Mr. Imbert:** The subject under discussion is the notification. I never said “relevance”. The hon. Prime Minister is not confining her statements to the notification.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** So lest we recreate some sort of doubt to the Members of the public looking on, this is what the Standing Order says, and if you all permit me, I can read from it.

“Subject to these Standing Orders, debate upon any motion, Bill or amendment shall be relevant to such motion, Bill or amendment, and a Member shall confine his observations to the subject under discussion.”

As I have been at pains to point out before, the relevance and/or the subject matter are all contextual. It is all—the second part of it:

“...confine his...”—answers—“...to the subject under discussion.”

—cannot be divorced from the relevant part of it. You cannot take relevance and put it in a glass jar in isolation; it has to be contextual. This is a very simple concept to understand. It must be contextual.

So I have ruled three times that a short amount of leeway is to be permitted to lay a foundation. The Member for Port of Spain South is a legendary cross-examiner, he does not rush in and ask a question, but rather, he lays a foundation before you get to the final question. So what you do is you lay an appropriate foundation. What I am allowing, pursuant to the Standing Order, is a short time to set the contextual foundation. So, move on, please.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you very much, Sir, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So here we are dealing with this notification from Her Excellency. And I am saying, unless we put the right person in the right place, we will continue to fail, as they failed for the last nine years.

In the last nine years, their Prime Minister, the second Prime Minister, their Minister of National Security, all of them, they transformed our country from paradise into a country where people would turn into victims. Nine years, parents living in fear all over this country, Mr. Speaker, and there it is—

**Mr. Gonzales:** Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, 48(1). It is a Michael Holding run-up.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** I am going to ask the hon. Prime Minister to move on quickly to the delivery stride.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You know, I am guided by the ruling of the hon. Speaker. I have already moved on from the \$66 billion, in case you all were not

listening. I have already moved on from that, and I went on to where we are today, if we fail to put the right office-holder to fight crime.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So we were all caught up in this place where crime had just become a runaway exercise. And all of this occurred under the same guys who are now talking about relevance and Standing Orders, not understanding that relevance is, what do you do to keep your citizens secure, and that is what we are about. That is what we are about.

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

**3.25 p.m.**

Everyone has to be treated equally. The Member made a very strange statement about some people are above the law. No one is above the law, hon Member for Arouca/Lopinot.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** No one—not under this Government—is above the law. But I want to take us back in this very exercise over the last nine years, what transpired in this Chamber when we were debating Motions of this nature. That is relevant because this Government intends—

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, point of order.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—to deal with this Notification in a totally different way from yours. This cannot go on all evening man.

**Mr. Imbert:** 48(1). What happened in the past is not relevant to this Notification.

**Mr. Speaker:** At the risk of sounding perfunctory, that objection needs only to be repeated to be dismissed. Move on.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you. So I come back—that everyone has to

be treated equally contrary to what the hon. Member for Arouca/Lopinot has said. And the process which has produced this nomination today has been the product of PNM's manipulation and perversion for last nine years.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This Government will not so subvert the law with respect to this Notification for the Commissioner of Police. They always ensured and I will give you the example—time after time, every time a Notification was brought, the Member is now telling us about “Oh we will support it”, “All is well and good”. Very nice sweet words when every time a Notification came here, what did they do? They take the top from the list and they put it at the bottom. The Prime Minister ran to the President and grabbed the merit list. That has to be—

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Grabbed the merit list. And so public confidence really has fallen to an all-time low in the TTPS and of course, into what happens in this. I remember very early, Mr.—

**Mr. Imbert:** Point of order, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. Member:** This is an abuse.

**Mr. Speaker:** Can I hear you? On what point of order?

**Mr. Imbert:** Yes, Sir. Same point of order. I realize the Member has a prepared speech but her prepared speech is not relevant.

**Mr. Speaker:** As I said before and I have ruled consistently, let us move on please. Time constraints.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Those on the other side—thank you, Mr. Speaker. I understand their whole aim is to frustrate us on this side. I will not get frustrated.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I will not. Whether you jump up 10 times, 15 times or 30 times, I will not become frustrated because the whole country became frustrated with you and ran you out of office.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Therefore on every occasion that that Government had the opportunity to deal with a notification or to deal with putting people into office, they have attempted to subvert it. In 2015, the case of *Harridath Maharaj v Attorney General of Trinidad And Tobago*—I know well because I was one of the lawyers.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** When that Government attempted to subvert the very law that give rise to putting a commissioner of police in place by inserting the then Minister of National Security into the process. So that is why we are here today with this Notification, that this Government will follow the law and not attempt to subvert the law—

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—when it comes to putting a commissioner of police in place. Harridath Maharaj. Remember the name Lucas. Remember the name Stephen Williams. Remember all the names on the list sent from the Police Service Commission to Her Excellency and to us. You moved every one of them. You moved every one and never followed the law. Never followed the law to appoint a commissioner of police. This Government will do differently. We will do it differently. We will follow the law.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** When they asked us—the public asked me “What

will you do? I said, “When we get the Notification, what will we do? We will follow the law”, and that is what we will do today. We came back to Stephen Williams in 2008—2018. They subverted the law. They went down the bottom of the list.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Mr. Speaker, 48(1).

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Prime Minister, can I, for the sake of moving on, ask you just to skip over that because we have made that point and it is in the record. Can I ask you to move on from that please?

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Yes Sir.

**Mr. Speaker:** Just to confine to the subversion of the merit list and the consideration of this one. So if you can skip off above that and move on.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Okay. I am guided again. I am a very obedient person in this Chamber to the rulings of the Speaker, so I am guided. I am very much guided. But I again say, the situation we are in in this country because of crime has been every single time, that Government has subverted the process that we are now attempting to follow and to put a commissioner in place. Deodat Dulalchan, Harold Phillip—do not forget Gary Griffith when you went from the top of the list to the bottom of the list so do not come with platitudes today to tell us—

**Mr. Gonzales:** Mr. Speaker, 48(1).

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I am responding to you with your platitudes.

**Mr. Speaker:** This one, I think it is misconceived. In my respectful view Arouca/Lopinot, I think the objection is misconceived.

**Hon. Member:** Like the whole PNM.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I thank you again, hon. Speaker.

**Hon. Member:** “How dem jumpin up so?”

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They have nothing else to do. That is their strategy to distract and disrupt the proceedings in this House and we will ensure we do the people’s business in this House.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Therefore, when we come to Mr. Guevarro, you have read his resume. Our colleague read the resume and therefore, all we can say is that I together with my team have agreed that we will not subvert the merit list. We will not subvert the recommendation of the Police Service Commission and if we have done our research and we have no reason to doubt that this is a good nominee and therefore, the Government will support the Notification as recommended.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I will say this further—before I close, Mr. Speaker, I want to say the nominations before us, I want us to remember October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021, when the then Government revealed that the Chairman went to the hon. then Prime Minister going to the Police Service Commission saying they lost all confidence in the then Commissioner of Police. I want to thank those who have served before; the Commissioners of Police, because there was a process I say that was subverted. If they were not able to function, let us trust that giving precedence to the law and the legal process in this business that Mr. Guevarro will conduct himself with all due integrity. We have no reason to doubt that would be otherwise and therefore we give full support to Mr. Guevarro as the next Commissioner of Police of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Port of Spain South.

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

**Mr. Keith Scotland SC** (*Port of Spain South*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. In response to the submission from the hon. Prime Minister and Member for Siparia, we put on record that once the court ruled in the matter of *Harridath Maharaj v Attorney General of Trinidad And Tobago* on the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 2021, that the process being followed then as we understood it for the appointment of acting commissioners were not in accordance with the law. The then Government, now this Opposition acted in accordance forthwith with the court's pronouncement and thereafter, followed that procedure as outlined by the court to the letter.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Prior to that, there was another approach to the merit list and that is why former Commissioners Griffith, McDonald, Jacob, et cetera, were declared null and void because the court ruled that the process being followed was incorrect. But before that date, every Government followed the process as they understood it to be.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Mr. Speaker, coming to the Motion and the Notification of the President, I am heartened that you have ruled that it must be viewed in a context because disappointment must be understood within the framework from which it emerged. We wish to put on record the reason why this side is supporting the Notification for the appointment of Mr. Allister Guevarro.

Firstly, Mr. Speaker, this came from a process that emanated from an independent institution called the Police Service Commission. Mr. Speaker, that body is empowered under section 122 of the Constitution to appoint Commissioners of Police and it is vital in maintaining professionalism and

impartiality in the police service. So having come from that process, this Notification is a product of that process and we support it, firstly.

Secondly, the checks and balances that were enshrined and that remain enshrined in that process promotes public trust, the rule of law, and in that regard, we support it. Mr. Speaker, other reasons why we support this nomination—I noticed that the mover of the Motion skimmed through the qualifications and it did not do justice to the skill and the merit of this nominee.

This nominee, apart from the training already mentioned by the mover, and hon. Member for Tunapuna, had specialist training and provides specialist training now to the job of Commissioner of Police. He was trained in leadership. He was trained in counterterrorism, cyber security, and new technologies, advanced law enforcement, credit card fraud, money laundering, national security training, undercover operations, intelligence analysis—something that is very important, Mr. Speaker, and in another place where you were—interview and interrogation of suspects. If that is done improperly Mr. Speaker, you know that it may lead to the freeing of persons on technical grounds because the police did not follow the proper process.

Most importantly, Mr. Speaker, when I perused the curriculum vitae of this candidate, I saw that he received some training in the sphere of information technology and computer training. It means that he has upgraded his skills from when he first entered in 1998 as a constable. What this appointment means, Mr. Speaker, for the person who lives in Sea Lots in Port of Spain South, is if you stand firm with a clean record and you work hard, in any sphere of your endeavour you can reach the highest echelon of your sphere of endeavours and that is the message I want to put to the members of Port of Spain South who have elected me for another five years to be their representative.

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

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Every day I thank them, Mr. Speaker. Not a day passes without me saying thanks to them. Not a day passes. Even though the Member for Barataria/ San Juan and his interlopers have tried to infiltrate Port of Spain South, it will not what happen.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member.

**Mr. Hosein:** Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 48(6)—[*Inaudible*—]—apologize.

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Mr. Speaker, he thinks—

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, you are being called upon to apologize.

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Mr. Speaker, what am I being called upon to apologize for? His attempt at interloping?

**Mr. Speaker:** Well I can repeat it to you. The mild pejorative that you used towards the Member for Barataria/San Juan.

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Yes. Can you, please, apologize and withdraw that description?

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Mr. Speaker, I withdraw the description of the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan as an interloper and I withdraw it and—

**Mr. Hosein:** Mr. Speaker, 48(6). The Member knows exactly what he is doing. He has nothing to say, to add to this debate, so he is engaging in irrelevant—

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Port of Spain South, can we resume your apology and your withdrawal of the statement?

**3.40 p.m.**

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Yes, please. So I withdraw my referral to the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan as an interloper, and I will use more parliamentary language, and I will ask him kindly to stay out of Port of Spain South business.

**Mr. Speaker:** You apologize?

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

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Now, Mr. Speaker, I sincerely apologize for calling him an interloper.

**Mr. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker—

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Mr. Speaker, as I move—

**Mr. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, Standing Order, 48(4). May I ask you to turn to Standing Order 48(4)? The Member cannot repeat in the apology the offensive language that he has used.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Can I say this? It is counterproductive. You all have all been here. Like all of us, we have read the Standing Orders. We know their intent, we know their purpose. Surely you must know better than to do that. So please, can I invite you to unequivocally withdraw it and unequivocally apologize and do not reoffend by repeating it within the body of your apology?

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

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Mr. Speaker, I unequivocally apologize for the reference made to the hon. Member of Barataria/San Juan by me earlier on. May I move on with my contribution please, Mr. Speaker?

**Mr. Speaker:** You withdraw it?

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Yes, completely withdrawn.

**Mr. Speaker:** We can just have it on your record.

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Yes please.

**Mr. Speaker:** And shall we move on?

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** Yes please.

**Mr. Speaker:** Please.

**Mr. K. Scotland SC:** So, Mr. Speaker, most importantly, as I was adding, he was trained in information technology and computer training and received intelligence analysis training from the DEA's office. This is very important, Mr. Speaker, because, having rose from the ranks of Constable to Senior Superintendent, he brings a wealth of knowledge and seems to be well-rounded. But I go back to my main thesis, that his appointment represents the epitome of persons who work hard, work honestly, and I want to commend it to the constituents of Port of Spain South. That being said, Mr. Speaker, I have also understood, and I have examined his appointment and how it may very well—how the notification and its effect may very well have a positive effect on the police service. It means that, having a substantive Commissioner of Police, he can now provide leadership and strategic direction to the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service.

The appointment of a substantive officer will also instill public trust and confidence in that office, there now being, based on this notification and its acceptance by the House, a substantive officer in the position. The notification will also ensure, if it is abided by, operational continuity and efficiency, because you will have a head of a service, and I looked at his age, he has some time to shape the service according to his skills.

It will also bring, Mr. Speaker, institutional accountability, because, as you are well aware, Mr. Speaker, a substantive Commissioner of Police is fully accountable to oversight bodies such as the Police Service Commission and the

Parliament and the public. It may very well engender greater international and national support for the office holder. All these things being considered, Mr. Speaker, and in light of the submissions made by the hon. Member for Siparia, on this side, we wholeheartedly support the nomination from the recommendation of the Police Service Commission, as notified by Her Excellency under her powers, and I respectfully take my seat. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Attorney General.

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

**The Attorney General (Sen. The Hon. John Jeremie SC):** Mr. Speaker, the Motion before us this afternoon, as set out in the Order Paper, is:

*Be it resolved* that the notification of the President of the nomination by the Police Service Commission of Mr. Allister Guevarro to the Office of Commissioner of Police be approved.

Now, the context, as you have said, is important, so I would like to spend a couple of minutes dealing with that. Mr. Speaker, I rise, of course, after quite a long time in this place. I was here before everyone, except my very good friend from Arima, my enemy, perhaps, from Diego Martin North/East, and my very good friend on the rest of the Benches across there, but I am here again after a long time. The personnel might have changed—just based on my experience this afternoon, I think there is something to be left for the tone and tenor of the contributions. I would try to be different. So I am honoured to rise to contribute to the Motion. The notification today engages one of the most consequential constitutional functions of this Parliament, that is, the affirmation of leadership at the highest echelons in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. It bears directly upon the efficiency, integrity, and importantly, public confidence in the

administration of law enforcement in Trinidad and Tobago. I might add that every citizen in the country will be interested in our deliberations.

Now, if you would allow me to spend a minute or two on the current law and the applicable Order.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Is that relevant?

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:** I do not know.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** No, I am asking them.

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:** I do not know they do not—

**Hon. Member:** The Speaker will determine that.

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:** I do not know if you have any respect for yourself, far less the Speaker.

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

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:** For the benefit of the House—

**Hon. Member:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:**—I should like to take this opportunity to briefly state the constitutional legal principles that govern the appointment of a Commissioner of Police. The notification is submitted in complete obedience to section 123 of the Constitution, which, when read together with the Commissioner of Police and Deputy Commissioner of the Police (Selection Process) (No. 2) Order of 2021, provides a deliberate, transparent and constitutionally safeguarded framework for the selection and appointment of individuals to the highest offices within the police service.

At the core of the process lies the Commission, a constitutionally established and independent body vested with the authority to ensure that such appointments are made on the basis of merit, integrity, and institutional suitability. More on that in a while, because my friends opposite seem to get into fits when we point out to

them that this process has not been faithfully observed in the past, and not by us. And I say “us” this afternoon, not by them.

So the process is rigorous. It involves advertisement, comprehensive security and professional vetting, the establishment of an order of merit list familiar to a gentleman who used to be on the other side, who had a propensity to take, steal, borrow, whatever, the list. But seriously, the legal and constitutional validity of the framework was affirmed by the High Court, by Justice Kangaloo in the matter *Balgobin Maharaj v the Attorney General of Trinidad Tobago* in 2021—we will not go into that today—but the judgment of Justice Kokaram not only clarified the law, but unequivocally upheld the critical role of the Commission in preserving the independence and impartiality of the appointment process. It is this very interpretation, rooted in respect for constitutional safeguards and the rule of law that we on this side have steadfastly upheld and my learned friends on the other side have found all manner of ways to subvert and throw out disrespect.

I shall, Mr. Speaker, respectfully say that the point that the Government has vigorously defended, the position that the Commission’s authority is central to safeguarding the integrity and meritocracy of police leadership appointments, cannot be seriously questioned. And, I say too that it will be recalled that attempts to modify the process for acting appointments by many on the other side, through the Constitution (Amdt.) Bill, 2024, failed, as we on this side stood firm in maintaining the Commission’s role in appointments to the Offices of Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of Police, and we took those positions as a principle stand taken in support of lawful and transparent governance.

Mr. Speaker, so I say that to say this. The notification is therefore far from an administrative formality. It is the culmination of a constitutionally enshrined process recognized by the courts, one that reinforces public trust, institutional

stability and the essential de-politicization of police leadership, a lesson that my friends on the other side have not learned.

**Hon. Member:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:** They should have learned before, because they were part of the drafting of these arrangements, to keep their grubby hands off the police.

**Hon. Member:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. Member:** What language!

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:** So the framework strikes a careful and appropriate balance between independent oversight and democratic accountability, ensuring that those entrusted with leading the police service do so under the imprimatur of the Constitution and with full legitimacy.

Now I turn to now to Mr. Guevarro. This Government expresses its unequivocal support for the nomination of Mr. Allister Guevarro to the Office of Commissioner of Police. Mr. Guevarro's distinguished career spanning more than two decades in law enforcement has been marked by dedication to public service, a consistent record of operational excellence and commendable leadership in some of the most demanding and complex of circumstances. His nomination not only reflects the high regard in which he is held by the Police Service Commission, but also stands as a resounding endorsement of the integrity, transparency and meritocratic rigor of the selection process undertaken by the Commission.

**3.55 p.m.**

It affirms that those who ascend to the highest ranks of the police service should do so, and should be taken to have done so, not by favour, but by proven merit. They do so by principled conduct and a resolute commitment to the safety and security of all of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Again, this is a point that

my friends on the other side ought by now to have learned.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** “Dey too harden.”

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:** They have not. “Dey harden”. Mr. Guevarro is a seasoned law enforcement professional, bringing to the fore over 20 years of experience in national security. His distinguished service within the Special Branch has seen him occupy several critical investigative roles, each marked by discretion, diligence and strategic acumen.

He is a graduate of the Police Academy in 1996. He has continually sought to elevate his professional capacity. He has received specialized training at the International Law Enforcement Academy in El Salvador, who has a Master of Bachelor’s Administration, and has done other courses, numerous other courses in various parts of the world. He has also been called upon in times of national importance to get intelligence on certain sensitive matters.

Now, the Government has full confidence in the Commission’s nomination. We are eager to have the position of the substantive Commissioner be regularized, and we know what has been going on for a considerable period of time under the stewardship of my friends opposite. The chaos that the nation has observed over the past month or two lies entirely at their feet—

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

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:**—and so too does the anxiety of the citizens.

It is an unequivocal truth that within recent years the country has experienced a troubling upsurge in crime with an increase in violent offences. Those things have created widespread fear among citizens, placed immense pressure on the national security infrastructure. Our Government, our new administration has taken a resolute and unwavering stance in its commitment to reduce the high levels of violent crime in this country. Just for the record, we are

also looking very seriously at something that my learned friends on the other side might be interested in, the investigation and prosecution of white-collar crime.

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

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:** So watch yourself, all of you.

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

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:** Those of you in front of me—

**Mr. Tancoo:** “Watch allyuh self.”

**Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC:**—watch yourself very carefully.

The administration has prioritized national security as a top agenda item, with focused efforts on boosting law enforcement capacity, enhancing intelligence gathering, and restoring public trust in the police service. In this regard, the Government recognizes the importance of appointing expert leadership in the position of Commissioner of Police to drive accountability, reform and efficiency within the service. This renewed focus, we hope, signals the beginning of an improvement in restoring peace, ensuring justice, safeguarding the well-being of every citizen of this country and returning us to a position where white-collar crime is punished. I know that my friend from Arouca/Lopinot in another incarnation would have spoken to me, before he was infected by his other friends, seriously about white-collar crime.

The role of Commissioner of Police is central to the architecture of crime-fighting in Trinidad and Tobago as the highest ranking officer in the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. The Commissioner is vested with the power to manage the police service, mandated to ensure the effective and efficient use of all available resources. That position is reinforced by section 45 of the Police Service Act, which charges the police with preserving peace, detecting crime, all crime, and apprehending offenders, functions that fall squarely under the strategic and

operational leadership of the Commissioner.

The importance of having a substantive, not acting Commissioner, cannot be overstated. We take this opportunity to place on record our deep appreciation to and thanks for the efforts of Mr. Junior Benjamin, who was left to rescue the service from the debacle that you had taken it to. This country owes him a debt of gratitude. We ask this honourable House therefore to support the Motion and to uphold the nomination of the Police Service Commission of Mr. Guevarro as this country's substantive Commissioner of Police. I beg to move.

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

**The Minister of Homeland Security (Hon. Roger Alexander):** Mr. Speaker, as I conclude my contribution on this most important Motion—

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

**Hon. Member:** He begged to move.

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]—beg to move?

**Ms. Ameen:** No. “Doh study dem.” You go ahead. “Doh study dem.”

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Come on. Come on. Member for Tunapuna, Minister of Homeland Security, I now call upon you.

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

**Hon. R. Alexander:** Mr. Speaker, as I conclude my contribution on this most important Motion, I wish to express sincere appreciation to the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago—

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

**Hon. R. Alexander:**—as she led this action from the front and confirmed a Commissioner of Police. By doing this it will restore confidence in the process of appointment of a Commissioner of Police.

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

**Hon. R. Alexander:** As the Prime Minister said, she has no horse in the race.

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

**Hon. R. Alexander:** To all Members of this honourable House who have chosen to support the nomination of Mr. Allister Guevarro to the post of Commissioner of Police, this should never be a political exercise as was done in the past.

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

**Hon. R. Alexander:** This Motion is not simply about affirming the name put forward by the Police Service Commission, it is about safeguards and public interest, ensuring the stability of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. It also strengthens the public confidence in law enforcement and leadership.

Mr. Guevarro is a seasoned professional, patriotic servant of the Republic, a man whose qualifications and career speaks volumes. His broad experience in intelligence, covert operations, counter-terrorism and inter-agency collaboration positions him uniquely to lead our police service in this challenging period. Mr. Speaker, I especially wish to commend the Members of the Opposition for their statesmanlike approach in supporting the nomination.

**Ms. Ameen:** They have no choice.

**Hon. Member:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. R. Alexander:** You want time to knock the desk?

**Ms. Ameen:** No, no, not even clap too.

**Hon. R. Alexander:** This is also a first for everything. We have just witnessed the first.

It is often said that national security should not be a political football and today the Parliament lived up to that ideal. In recent years we have witnessed the difficulties that can arise when consensus breaks down of matters as critical as the

appointment of a Commissioner of Police. It is therefore not lost on the public, nor this Government, that the decision to support Mr. Guevarro represents the maturing of our political culture, a movement where country comes before party—

**Hon. Members:** “Aaaye.”

**Ms. Ameen:** “Dem doh know about dat. You doh study dat”.

**Hon. R. Alexander:** Let me say it again.

**Hon. Member:** Repeat it. Repeat it.

**Hon. R. Alexander:** Let me say it again.

**Hon. Member:** Repeat it.

**Hon. Member:** Yeah.

**Hon. R. Alexander:** Let me say it again, a movement where country comes before party—

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

**Ms. Ameen:** Yes. “Dey doh know about dat.”

**Hon. R. Alexander:**—and stability triumphs over division.

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

**Hon. R. Alexander:** This Government is committed to restoring faith in our institutions. We have allowed the independent Police Service Commission to do it—

**Hon. Member:** Another—[*Inaudible*]—in the President’s house.

**Hon. R. Alexander:** [*Laughter*]—without any interference.

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

**Hon. R. Alexander:** Am I to say that again?

**Ms. Ameen:** Yes, man, say it again.

**Hon. R. Alexander:** We have allowed the independent Police Service Commission to do their work free from interference—

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

**Hon. R. Alexander:**—and today we are seeking the result of that integrity and appointment based on merit, experience and service.

Mr. Speaker, let us take this moment as a signal to the public that the Parliament can work, that when it comes to safety of our citizens and strength of our institutions, and the protection of democracy, we can, we must act as one. Let us give Mr. Guevarro the full backing he deserves as he prepares to lead the organization, critical to the well-being and safety of every citizen.

Mr. Speaker, hon. Members, as this House, as we continue to prioritize the safety and security of our nation, the Government remains steadfast in its efforts in continuing and modernizing, strengthening the infrastructure within the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service. In this regard, the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service recently purchased and received 67 new police vehicles. These vehicles were added to the existing fleet which we will be able to utilize throughout the country.

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

**Hon. R. Alexander:** “Like he doh know.” [*Laughter*]

The Government has been committed to restore faith in our institutions. We have allowed the independent Police Service Commission to do its job freely. Also, I am also advised that several critical projects are currently in progress. These include construction of the Matura and Manzanilla Police Stations, the establishment of a Coastal and Riverine Patrol Unit at the Carenage Police Station, and the development work on the Police Academy.

In addition, work is undergoing at the Ste. Madeleine Police Station. In Tobago, Phase 1 of this establishment of the Mounted and Canine Branch at the Shirvan Road Police Station is ongoing. Furthermore, the establishment of a state-of-the-art police academy in Cumuto.

**4.10 p.m.**

I have evaluated the standards of local enforcement training, and professional development is being undertaken. Let us support the brave men and women of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service by ensuring they have sturdy, respected leadership at the top. Let me repeat this. Let us all support the brave men and women of the Trinidad and Tobago Police Service by ensuring they have sturdy, respected leadership at the top. Mr. Speaker, I beg to move.

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

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved:*

That the Notification of the President of the nomination by the Police Service Commission of Mr. Allister Guevarro to the office of Commissioner of Police be approved.

**Mr. Speaker:** I call on the Minister of Health.

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

**CHILDREN'S LIFE FUND (AMDT.) BILL, 2025**

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Dr. Lackram Bodoie):** Mr. Speaker, I beg to move:

That a Bill to amend the Children's Life Fund Act, Chap. 29:01, be now read a second time.

Mr. Speaker, first of all, allow me the opportunity to congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker of this august House and I want to wish you all the best going forward as you guide us through the process of conducting the business of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, I also wish to congratulate the Member for Siparia for being elected Prime Minister for the second time, and indeed, as the only woman in our beloved nation to occupy the office of Prime

Minister—

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

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:**—not once, Mr. Speaker, but twice. The Member for Siparia remains an outstanding example of resilience, courage and leadership for women in this country, especially those who are aspiring to high political office. And yes, Member for Arima, perhaps one day your turn will come, but I want to say to you that it will be a long time from now because we have a lot to do on this side—

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

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:**—to fix the problems that you all would have left on that side. I also want to take the opportunity, of course, to thank the good people of Oropouche West for their warm embrace and support for me as their Member of Parliament. And, of course, I want to congratulate—I must congratulate all my colleagues on this side for their magnificent victories in their respective constituencies, especially the new ones who are joining us here today.

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

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:** Mr. Speaker, it was my belief that we would return to Government last April 28<sup>th</sup> because the people were convinced of our capability and capacity to deliver on our manifesto promises. They believed that we were capable of doing the things that would make their lives, and that of their children, better, and they believed that we were capable of bringing back visionary leadership and governance to Trinidad and Tobago. Mr. Speaker, the people were not wrong in choosing the team on this side because, Mr. Speaker, in the five short weeks that we have been in government, things have been happening in every Ministry, and this is, of course, despite the deep financial hole that Trinidad and Tobago was left in by those on other side, but we will speak about that another time.

So, Mr. Speaker, today, we are here to deliver on the first of several promises made to the population by the hon. Prime Minister, the Member for Siparia, when she asked the people of Trinidad and Tobago for their votes, and that is to amend the Children's Life Fund Act, so that more of our children could benefit. It is no secret that fixing health care and caring for children have always been foremost in the mind and indeed in the heart of the Member for Siparia, the hon. Prime Minister. Her track record will show that, Mr. Speaker. So, just like she did in her first term in 2010, with passing of the Children's Life Fund Act as one of her first actions as Prime Minister, we are here today to treat with the nation's children as we lay the very first Bill in this First Session of the Thirteenth Parliament, having just taken the action to recommend the appointment of a Commissioner of Police, another very important function of this Government in this Parliament, Mr. Speaker.

So, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank, of course, the Prime Minister for her faith and trusting me with the ministerial responsibility for health—

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

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:**—but especially so for the honour and privilege to lay the very first Bill in this Thirteenth Parliament.

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

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:** Mr. Speaker, to the Prime Minister and to the people of Trinidad and Tobago, I say to you that I take this responsibility very seriously and I give you the assurance that I will do my very best.

So, Mr. Speaker, why are we coming to amend the Children's Life Fund Act here today? The Children's Life Fund, 2010, was a historic and innovative legislative measure that gave hundreds of sick children another lease on life by creating a window for them to access highly specialized care from foreign experts

at recognized institutions abroad, when the required treatment was not available locally. Over the last 15 years, hundreds of lives have been saved. On the other hand, a number of applications were denied and in many instances, decisions were delayed, occasionally resulting in the possibly premature death of some children.

Information supplied by the Children's Life Fund Authority showed that during the period 2010—2025, the 15 years that the Children's Life Fund has been in existence, that there were 472 applications for assistance. Of these—and I refer here to this document from the Children's Life Fund—472 applications, 392 applications were approved, with those children subsequently receiving treatment abroad in foreign medical institutions, with good outcomes in the majority of cases. So, the Children's Life Fund, undoubtedly, Mr. Speaker, remains an important item in the State's arsenal when it comes to providing the best care for our sick children. But, Mr. Speaker, the issue here has been the declined applications. On the other hand, we have had some 80 declined applications during this same period, 2010—2025.

When we requested the information from the Children's Life Fund, Mr. Speaker, several reasons were advanced by the Children's Life Fund board, as per the information provided here by the CEO, and I reflect on the table which was supplied, looked at the figures which were available from 2015—2025. The reasons given—various reasons, Mr. Speaker—one of the common reason is not life threatening; the other reason would be poor prognosis; another reason was treatment—was for investigations—which is not life-saving; another reason was that patients' requests fell outside the ambits of the Children's Life Fund Authority.

When this is analyzed, Mr. Speaker, one of the commonest conditions for which the Life Fund application was declined would have been for the condition called beta thalassemia major, which is a blood condition, and I am going to speak

a little bit about that in a short while, Mr. Speaker. So, we are saying here that there were several applications which were declined, and for several reasons, which the proposed changes are intended to address in these amendments.

The other issue, of course, in addition to applications being declined, Mr. Speaker, would have been the issue of long waiting times for approval of applications. A perusal of the waiting times from the inception of the Fund in 2010, Mr. Speaker, showed that initially, because of the teething problems, you would have had, you know, a long waiting time but then, we would have come down at the end of 2014, there would have been a decline in the waiting time. When we speak of waiting time, we are speaking of application to approval, we are speaking of approval to departure. Therefore, when you add those two, you get a total processing time, and this is from the time an application is made to when the child actually departs to have the treatment done. That has come down to—so the approval to departure is about 70 days. But, Mr. Speaker, this is still too long a time and in many instances, that long wait can create a problem. So still, from 2014—2025, the figures we have, it is still somewhere around 85 days for departure. So, that is something that needs to be addressed, Mr. Speaker, and it is the intention, of course, of these amendments to try to address that in some meaningful way.

The question here, Mr. Speaker, is: What were the consequences of the long waiting times? And all of us here will be familiar with the numerous complaints, the numerous newspaper articles, Mr. Speaker. I do not intend to go into all of them, but just to reflect on the kind of pain and suffering, that not only the children suffer, but, of course, the parents, Mr. Speaker.

If you will allow me, Mr. Speaker, to quote from Trinidad *Express*, March 02, 2016, an article by Nikita Braxton, and I read—and this is regarding:

“Baby Miracle loses battle to live”

And here:

“The baby’s father Kerwin Cross”—says—“believes that had there been a shorter waiting period, Miracle would have been alive today. ‘She waited’—and this is painful—“as long as she could...She would have gotten through if the system was faster and if it was more efficient...She couldn’t wait so long...It’s so sad...”

End of quote there, Mr. Speaker. But I just use that, you know, as an example of why this Government, you know, would have taken this step to try to improve the efficiency, not only in terms of expanding the conditions available but, of course, in trying to make the process faster because sick children at that age, time is of the essence, in terms of accessing and providing medical care, Mr. Speaker. And you know, the article goes on to say:

“...that funds”—and I quote again—“for such complicated surgeries are usually approved in a maximum period of two weeks. ‘The surgery was so complex it took too long for Life Fund to respond...I was angry and hurting...”

And this is Kerwin Cross, baby Miracle’s father, expressing his emotions. And you know, this is 2016.

Again, in 2016, *Newsday*, Saturday, 18 June, 2016, there is a sad case of:

“...a one-year old child - Navene Harripersad -”—who actually—“died while the State was seeking legal advice from the Ministry of the Attorney General on the question of the interpretation of”—the—“laws...”—of—  
 “...the Children’s Life Fund...”

So, again, Mr. Speaker, it is in relation to some of these issues that we are here today to try and address and make the administration of the fund a bit tighter.

I will just give a few more quotations here. This is 2017, this is the next year, Mr. Speaker, and this is obviously a pattern happening here. This is the case, it says that:

“Children’s Life Fund turns down 5-year-old child”

And this five-year-old child—it is in the newspaper, I can call the name

“FIVE-year-old Haleema Mohammed who is ailing with Beta Thalassemia Major - a blood disorder, and who had been accepted by a hospital in India to undergo a bone marrow transplant,”—and a bone marrow transplant is actually the cure for children with beta thalassemia major, which is a blood disease—“was...denied funding by the Children’s Life Fund...”

So, Mr. Speaker, it goes on, and it shows, you know, that it is a pattern here, in terms of the refusal or denial of the Children’s Life Fund based on the current legislation and the constraints of the legislation perhaps.

Again, here is another case here of:

“...Jovi Mitchell who is in need of a bone marrow transplant...

beta thalassemia major...

His parents, Anita and Andres Mitchell are farmers and they were not able to afford the million dollar surgery.”

**4:25 p.m.**

So we are seeing, Mr. Speaker, a pattern of a lot of pain and suffering where you have parents, of course, who cannot afford these treatments, these treatments are not available locally, and therefore they rely upon the Children’s Life Fund to assist them. I go on to 2022, Mr. Speaker, and the headline here in the *Guardian* of 24<sup>th</sup> April, 2022 is:

“Teen’s death raises questions about Children’s Life Fund

The death of a teenager while he was awaiting treatment abroad has raised

questions about the operations of the Children's Life Fund..."

And this is the case of:

"Triston Ramlochan, 14, who had acute lymphoblastic leukemia..."

And I put that on the record, Mr. Speaker, because this is one of the conditions that we are adding in Schedule 3 of the Bill as we go forward. So I am just showing that the addition and the expansion of the conditions that will be considered for assistance from the Children's Life Fund is expanded based on evidence, it is based on a need that has been well established. So unfortunately, this 14-year-old died whilst awaiting the approval to travel. So, this condition of acute lymphoblastic leukemia, if one looks at the Schedule, is actually being added as one of the conditions.

And the last quotation I will make and put on the record, of course, is the one of Jovi Mitchell, and again, here is the condition of a major blood disorder, beta thalassemia. And I speak of beta thalassemia because beta thalassemia is not a life threatening condition, in many instances it is not a life threatening condition and therefore it would not have qualified under the current situation for assistance by the Children's Life Fund. But it is indeed a condition, you know, which carries a lot of morbidity, requires a lot of repeated blood transfusions, takes a lot of effort, that can affect the quality of life of the children.

So, Mr. Speaker, before I go on I want to put on the record, you know, that we note that although innovative and visionary in its conception in 2010 by then Prime Minister, Kamla Persad-Bissessar, the Children's Life Fund had to evolve to meet changing circumstances and challenges and this is where over the last 15 years would have been the shortcoming. So, Mr. Speaker, I have to ask the question, did anyone else take notice of the issues regarding the Children's Life Fund besides the media and beside the Opposition, the then Opposition? And I see

that my colleague, the then Member for Princes Town, who is here on this side today, would have on many occasions would have raised several issues regarding some of these children. Regarding the delay in waiting, the Member is here with us, he will recall, of course, as early as 2016/2017, he would have flagged this very House together on the advice of the Prime Minister, the Member for Couva South now here and, of course, that was an issue.

So besides the media, we in the Opposition would have raised these issues, but, but, Mr. Speaker, the story goes on somebody else had a look at this, somebody else was worried, Mr. Speaker, and who was worried about this? Mr. Speaker, a Joint Select Committee of this Parliament was worried about this and the Joint Select Committee of Parliament did an enquiry and the report I have in my hand here, April 1<sup>st</sup> 2022. April 1<sup>st</sup> 2022, Mr. Speaker, three years ago, just over three years ago. And this here is a report, it is the Third Report of the Joint Select Committee on Local Authorities Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities, and the recommendation—and this would have been submitted to the Ministry of Health, Mr. Speaker. Normally, the report of a Joint Select is submitted to the Ministry for the ministerial response, and I have to quote from this, and I quote:

“The CLFA should develop a draft proposal to amend Act no. 12 of 2010 to accommodate a wider range of children in need of medical treatment.”

**Mr. Speaker:** Members, it is now 4.30 p.m. and I think Members would have been informed prior to today's Sitting that we are going to—pursuant to Standing Order 12(2), we are going to take the break at 4.30 p.m., we are going to resume the break at 4.30 p.m. Now, I am aware that the Standing Order says half hour, I am also aware the countervailing principle that the House has the power to regulate itself. If there is no objection by anyone, I would suggest perhaps 45 minutes, we

have been here for quite a long time. So subject to what Members of the House say, I propose we resume at 5.15 p.m., if there is no objection. Well, the House is suspended until 5.15 p.m.

**4.30 p.m.:** *House suspended.*

**5.15 p.m.:** *House resumed.*

**Mr. Speaker:** Good afternoon Members, again welcome back. Can I ask the Minister of Health to resume? I think when we took the break, you had 26 minutes remaining. Minister.

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

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. So Mr. Speaker, before the break, I had alluded to a report of a Joint Select Committee of this Parliament which was laid in this Parliament in 2022 and I was about to read from that report and if you would permit I will just read from the paragraph again, Mr. Speaker, and it says here:

“The CLFA should develop a draft proposal to amend Act no. 12 of 2010 to accommodate a wider range of children in need of medical treatment.”

It goes on to say:

“This proposal should be done based on an assessment of applications that were denied based on provisions in the Act, but required parents to seek alternative sources of funding for overseas treatment. The proposal should also consider including a provision for approving medical costs that exceed the TT \$1 million limit on a case-by-case basis.”

So, Mr. Speaker, I read that into the record and, you know, I have to ask the question and I am sure the public has to ask the question and I am sure the parents of those children who would have suffered over the last three years would have asked the same question, and why was nothing done about this in the last three

years.

So, Mr. Speaker, what did the previous Government do about this, Mr. Speaker, this has been here for the last three years to action. But I will answer that question for those on the other side, Mr. Speaker, and the answer is nothing. So some of the recommendations, you know, are there, and that is part of the reason we are here to look at the very recommendations and to action some of these recommendations. So, Mr. Speaker, we are here today to make these amendments so that many of those children who were denied care in the past will now benefit and this is not only to save their lives but also to extend the lives of others and improve their quality of life.

So, Mr. Speaker, I will move on to the proposed amendments in this Bill, and if we can look at the first amendment, which is to make the case for life-extending diseases. So clause 3 of the Bill speaks to amending, and we are going to speak about “life-limiting illness” instead of “life-threatening illnesses.” So this will allow many of those cases that were denied in the past to now be facilitated and considered by the Children's Life Fund authority. The term—so this is section 4(2b) which is the section that creates the change but—“life-limiting illness” as understood by the WHO, the World Health Organization, refers to a condition that can be reasonably expected to shorten a person's live often with significant impact on their quality of life it is not just about the time remaining but also the degree to which the illnesses affect daily functioning and well-being.

So in that regard, in terms of expanding the conditions in the Schedule, I had the opportunity to do some consultation and to engage some paediatric subspecialists, those are qualified paediatric “baby doctors” so to speak, but who have an interest in subspecialty training so some of those conditions that you will see in the Schedule, Members, would have come from an eminent panel of both

local and foreign specialists, Mr. Speaker. And I just want to put on the record, I think it is important to recognize and commend those who have contributed to these amendments and to the new Schedule so I want to put on the record and thank Dr. Kevon Dindial, who is a Paediatric Haematologist/Oncologist; Dr. Leonardo Akan, a Paediatric Endocrinologist.

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

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:** Dr. Barbara Rampersad, Paediatric, Surgeon; Dr. Ronand Ramroop, a Paediatric Cardiologist; Dr. Vanita Shukla, a Paediatric Neurologist; Dr. Nicole Solomon, a Paediatric Nephrologist, these are all paediatric subspecialists who work at the Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex and they are pediatricians in different areas, neurology, cardiology, oncology and so on and I say this simply because it reflects the input in terms of the conditions we have added to the Schedule, so I think that is important. And, of course, it is also important to recognize Dr. Sherman Soman, Pediatric Gastroenterologist and Dr. Melanie Kirby-Allen who is the haematology lead for the hospital for SickKids in Canada, which is a well-known internationally recognized facility for treating with children. So just to give Members the assurance that this list, you know was compiled based on some very expert input.

So, Mr. Speaker, this is regarding the change for changing term from “life-threatening” to “life limiting illness.” Now, section the 21A in the Bill, if you look at clause 6 it introduces a new section 21A and this gives the Minister the power now to review the decision of the board and so it says here 21A.(1):

“Where the Board rejects an application for a grant under this Act, the Chief Executive Officer shall, within three days thereof, submit the decision of the Board together with its reasons and all supporting documents to the Minister, for his review.

- (2) The Minister may, after reviewing the decision of the Board, affirm annul or vary that decision.
- (3) The Minister shall notify the Board of his decision within seven days.”

So why is there a need? Why was it necessary to introduce this new section? So what it does here, it gives the Minister the power to review the rejected applications. Not necessarily to change the outcome or the decision, Mr. Speaker, but to ensure, you know, that there is some oversight when citizens feel aggrieved. It also allows the Minister and the Ministry to monitor the declined cases so as to expand the Schedule if and when necessary, you know, as more and more diseases become treatable and may be amenable to assistance from the Children's Life Fund.

You see, Mr. Speaker, what is the current situation when an application is declined? Well, at this time when an application is rejected, the applicant will go to the media or the Minister who at this time has no power to intervene and the applicant either ends up going to court, by that time it is too late, Mr. Speaker, and, of course, that can cost money and take time and it is not in the best interest of child. So this is why this amendment is very, very important, Mr. Speaker.

So we if we look at section 21B which is clause 6 again, and this is the second amendment here, 21B and it says, it gives the Minister the power to grant approval in exceptional circumstances. Why is this necessary? So there are many cases, and you have to understand, the Act, as it is currently constituted really limits the board in terms of what they can do and what they cannot do. So some of the denials in the past would not necessarily have been the fault of the board they were constrained and therefore as a responsible Government, as a Government that cares about the needs of children and the health of children we are looking at a way

to allow the Minister and to allow the Government, you know, to treat with some of these cases in a more humane and favorable way.

So it says here 21B:

“Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act, the Minister may in urgent or exceptional circumstances consider and treat with an application for a grant if the Minister is satisfied that:”

And there are two conditions:

“That the board is unable to meet for any reason or otherwise perform its functions in a timely manner; or action is required in the public interest in furtherance of the purposes of this Act.”

**5.25 p.m.**

So, why is this necessary? Sometimes the thing about children who are ill, and who are sick, is that sometimes decisions need to be made very quickly, very urgently. Sometimes something may come on a weekend, on a Saturday, a Sunday, it may take a little time for—although there are provisions in the Act for the Board to meet on an emergency basis, this can still take some time. It requires a quorum and so on. So this allows the Minister the ability and the power, you know, to review a case, to look at a case, you know, in a very timely manner. And of course, it goes on to say:

“Where the Minister acts pursuant to subsection (1), he shall notify-

- a) the Board or
- b) where the Board is not constituted, the Chief Executive Officer.”

So it takes care of a situation perhaps where a board may not have been constituted, in the absence of a board, and so on. So, those are the two amendments that are in the Bill before us, Mr. Speaker. So, again, the justification for this is that, for section 21B, it allows the Minister the discretion to vary policy

in the public interest. That is important in terms of, you know, governance. Not every circumstance or medical condition can be legislated for. It may not be in the Schedule and, of course, the Government is ultimately accountable to the people and has responsibility for the health of the children.

Now, in the stakeholder consultations, Mr. Speaker, which we did, including the current staff and CEO of the Children's Life Fund Board, input from the current Chairman as well, and the other stakeholders, and in perusing this report of the Joint Select Committee, there were other issues that came about, and when one looks at the reasons for rejection of some of the children, some of the cases, there were other issues that came up.

So one of the things that we are looking at, and I propose, Mr. Speaker, I am giving notice that there will be some further amendments to effect these changes. One of the issues is that the current Act limits the assistance to \$1 million, and that is something that would have been in 2015. But, of course, the cost of medical treatment has increased, and the evidence here that I will have in front of me, will show that between the period—and again this is information from the Children's Life Fund Authority—that over the five-year period 2020 to fiscal 2025 to date, there were five cases where the cost would have exceeded \$1 million and therefore the Children's Life Fund Authority would have been constrained. I will just give you an example.

So, for example, this is a case of a carcinoma cancer of the sinus, of the face, where the cost would have been \$2.24 million, and other cases where it would have exceeded \$1 million, \$1.1 million, you know, so in the region. So it would have exceeded \$1 million. And, keep in mind, Mr. Speaker, that many of these citizens who are seeking this care, an extra \$100,000 could make the difference, you know, an extra \$200,000 could make the difference. But the important thing

here, Mr. Speaker, is that the—I mean, we have constraints financially, of course, but when one looks at the record, there would have only been about five or six cases during that period. So it is something that perhaps the Government would be able to manage, so we are looking at that in terms of increasing the ceiling and that would be the subject of one of the amendments.

The other issue that came about, Mr. Speaker, and I think it is a very important issue because—In fact, it is very interesting that the Board actually refused this suggestion, and the suggestion was made in one case for foreign specialists, for a foreign specialist to actually come to Trinidad and Tobago, to come to this country, and provide the expertise using the public facilities that are available in Trinidad. This is something that, you know, an avenue that can be explored. It will be a cost to the Children's Life Fund, but it can be a very economic measure in terms of, you know, allowing the foreign specialists to operate in local facilities. So this can be more cost effective.

The other benefit of that, Mr. Speaker, would be the fact that you create opportunities for the training of local doctors. So one can envisage over a period of time that it will come to a point where, with the input of some of these specialists that are coming here and performing these operations and so on, they are already—it is already being done in some avenues, some areas, but that can allow training of the local doctors. So it is a very important amendment that we are considering.

The other amendment that will come before the House, Mr. Speaker, is one that will allow the Minister to amend the Schedule as required, because even though, you know, we have a list of conditions in the present revised Schedule, there are conditions that can come up that can qualify but, you know, would need to be approved, sometimes on very short notice. So one of the amendments will

make provision for that. The current situation allows the Minister to amend the Schedule, but it has to come to Parliament by negative resolution. So, we could too, then come into Parliament for negative resolution. It could make the difference between life and death. We are proposing that the Minister be given the power to make that decision by publication. So it is not any secret. It becomes public knowledge that this condition was approved, and therefore for those in the future. So there is nothing—it is all transparent.

So, just to give a little justification, and I do not want to get too technical here, Mr. Speaker, but just for the benefit of those who might be looking on, for the parents and so on of ill children, we are adding to the Schedule in the area of haematology severe aplastic anaemia, beta thalassaemia, which has been one of the conditions that has been refused previously, sickle cell disease, and inherited bone marrow failure syndromes.

I just want to take a moment to talk a little bit about sickle cell disease. So, you know, it is a potentially serious condition and, of course, to distinguish between sickle cell disease and sickle cell trait, we had to be cautious that the gate is not opened so wide that, you know, the fund will become overwhelmed by cases that are not as urgent or, you know, as needy. So the sickle cell trait is a mild disease. Many of our children, citizens, have that. They can live comfortably with that. But the sickle cell disease is the more serious one. And the treatment for that is a bone marrow transplant, which is not available locally at this time. So, we have opened the window here for patients with sickle cell disease.

Likewise, I would have mentioned the severe aplastic anaemia, again, requires a bone marrow transplant, which is not available at this time. And, the most important one, the majority of those who were declined would have been for the beta thalassaemia. Again, that is an inherited blood disorder. And what happens

with these children currently is that every month they have to go for a blood transfusion. And this can be, you know, it can be, you know, a challenge on the resources of the State. It is also a challenge, you know, to have to go in every month to have a blood transfusion when in truth, and in fact, the condition can be cured by a bone marrow transplant through the Children's Life Fund paying for it. So that would be the justification for some of these conditions.

The other conditions—that is the haematology. For endocrinology, we have added two other conditions. There is one condition where a baby can be born and be producing too much insulin. And what happens is that the insulin causes the baby's blood sugar to drop. So these babies can—children—can come back, you know, with recurrent, what you call low blood sugar. It affects the quality of life if it is not treated properly and so on, and they could actually die from that. So these are some of the conditions we have added. In addition to some oncology conditions which were refused in the past—Acute lymphoblastic leukemia is one of those and that would have been part of the report in the newspaper for one such person. So, I am just putting Members on notice that those amendments will be circulated and come to the committee stage for discussion. I think it is important to mention that.

So, I have been through the Bill clause by clause, Mr. Speaker. I just wanted to thank the doctors, again, for their input. I mentioned that already. But I also want to thank another team of specialists, Mr. Speaker, on the record. I will not call the names this time, but there is something called a clinical panel listing. I think it is important that the public knows that, you know, there is a lot of voluntary work. These are highly-trained specialists. They can be well-paid if they sent in fees, Member for Aranguetz/St. Joseph, and the Member for Toco/San Grande. But these are doctors who are giving freely of their time and their

expertise.

So there are doctors here, the paediatric consultants. So this is the panel of doctors whom the Children's Life Fund will refer for opinions. Yeah? So you have paediatric cardiologists, you have paediatrics in various fields and so on. Right? Then you have paediatric surgeons as well. Those who will perform surgery locally, and you have the endocrinologist specialists, neurology specialists, organ transplant specialists, and so on. So there are many, many doctors who would give voluntarily of their time and I just wanted to put that on the record. Those specialists will know who they are in terms of the clinical panel listing. So, I wanted to publicly on behalf of the people of Trinidad and Tobago express our thanks to them and our gratitude to them for performing this job.

So, Mr. Speaker, as I conclude I just want to say, that these amendments are long overdue, that health is a right under this Government, and health for children especially will be a right under this Government, and this is why we have taken the liberty and the privilege of the very first Bill that we have brought to the Parliament to look after the health of the most vulnerable ones in the society. Of course, this was our Prime Minister's vision. She has, you know, a very soft spot for children, and rightly so, Mr. Speaker. So, children will be a priority for us, whether it is in the area of health, whether it is in the area of education, the social services, and I want to commend this Bill to the House, Mr. Speaker, and I look forward to contributions from colleagues on the other side. And with those few words, Mr. Speaker, I beg to move. Thank you.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

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

**Mr. Stuart Young SC** (*Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West*): Thank you very

much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I start today's contribution by thanking the constituents of Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West for giving me a third term, and the privilege of serving them.

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

**Mr. S. Young SC:** Because, for me certainly I see the opportunity to represent constituents and to represent Trinidad and Tobago as a privilege. I move quickly along to say that, it is a no-brainer that anything that is being done to provide a level of support and to provide a level of service to the children of Trinidad and Tobago is something that is very commendable. The Children's Life Fund began in 2010. During the course of my contribution I will refer to some of the difficulties that it has had over the course of time, and in particular, a concern that without proper oversight how quickly corruption or other issues can creep in, and it is merely a caution, because the Life Fund is now 15 years old. It has gone through many transitions, and we as a country should have a fairly good idea now of what needs to improve, what can improve, what needs to change and what should not change.

**5.40 p.m.**

I think to give a proper context, it is important that we refer to the Act, because it is important that the population as well as Members of the House have an understanding of what already exists in law, and how the Fund as is set out in law, how that fund—how this Fund is meant to operate. Because it is very easy to fall into a trap that by just looking at the Bill that is before us today, which on the face of it, appears to be a simple Bill. Really, a Bill that achieves two things in a nutshell. One, as we heard the Minister of Health say, there is an attempt to expand, as he put it, the services that are now covered by the Children's Life Fund, and I will deal with that. And then really the second amendment, is to give the

Minister really, what I call a “super power” because the Minister is now being inserted into this piece of legislation, giving him or her a power that really is not subject to review, save that if you introduce the concept of judicial review. And that can be a good thing or it can be a bad thing, but it is something that we need to be cautious about and I will get to that.

So, when one looks at Act 12 of 2010, which is the parent legislation that we are seeking to amend today, one sees first of all, it is important to see, well, what was this Fund set up for? What is the Children's Life Fund and Authority set up for, and that is found in section 4 of the Act. And importantly, at section 4(2), and we are being asked to amend 4(2)(b) with the Bill before us. Section 4(2) talks about:

“The functions of the Authority...”

—and of course it is:

“(a) operate, manage and administer the Children's Life Fund;”

—which is what we will expect. But the first amendment that we are being asked to look at here today, is to section:

“4(2)

(b) facilitate the provision of specialist medical treatment to children suffering from life threatening illnesses for which the required treatment is unavailable at a local medical institution;”

And what we are being asked to consider here today, and what is being suggested by the Government is as I heard him say, the Minister say, to expand from “life threatening illnesses”, to delete that and to replace it with this concept of “life limiting illnesses listed in Schedule 3”. And I caution by listing it in Schedule 3— and I understand what you are trying to do. You are trying to capture as you told us, after you having consulted a number of specialists who gave paediatric care to

children. You are trying to capture a variety of diseases or conditions, but you are limiting it, is the first submission, and I urge us to be cautious.

Because by saying it is listed in Schedule 3, what you have now done is you have tied your hands, tied the hands of the Children's Life Fund that any sickness, any illness, any condition, but God forbid any one of the children in this country has fallen subject to, that is not captured in Schedule 3, immediately excludes them from the fund.

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

**Mr. S. Young SC:** So, we must be cautious about going down that road. I understand what you are trying to achieve, because I assume your policy is by saying or leaving it as "life threatening illnesses", that is subject to interpretation, it is why it is broad. But, perhaps that is how the legislation is best left, that you are allowing any spectrum of disease that medical experts—because it is really for medical experts to say. It is not for us lay people to say what is or what is not a life threatening disease, and that is why the Minister has said he has referred to a number of specialists, consultants both locally and abroad, which is right thing to do. So, the first caution is be careful of the ill you are trying to fix, you are actually making worse by now specifically limiting yourself to express conditions that are identified particularly in Schedule 3. I accept that you can amend the Schedule by order as you go along, as you said—

**Mr. Bodeo:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. S. Young SC:**—what is that?

**Mr. Bodeo:** [*Inaudible*] Thank you, Member. Member, that was considered and there is an amendment, which I will have circulated now that allows that situation not to occur. So it is not limiting the numbers, it gives the Minister the discretion.

**Mr. S. Young SC:** Thank you very much. So, you see, the caution is actually a

correct caution because the Bill that we have before us—

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

**Mr. S. Young SC:**—a Bill that we only had sight of a few days ago. A Bill that we were called to Parliament here today, as we are meant to do, as elected Members to look at. Immediately, you can see that the Opposition being responsible through me, and my colleagues, we have looked at it, and you could smile, but it is the truth, that we came here to say, “hey, do not limit the amount of treatment we may be able to give to a child who needs it”, by expressly limiting yourself to what is in Schedule 3, and I will wait to see these amendments, which I have not had the benefit or the privilege of having sight of at this time. I just heard mentioned a short while ago. So that is the first issue.

The second, when you go through the Act as it is, and I offer caution on, and that the population should understand how this is meant to apply, is we go immediately to section 9, what the Board of the Children's Life Fund, the functions of the Board. What the Board does. And you see that the Board:

“(a) authorize the payment of medical and related expenses of beneficiaries;”

What I should point out just before I move on to that, is as the Act currently is where we say “life threatening illnesses”, that was not defined in the legislation. So, maybe when we see the proposed amendment it may be some sort of broader definition, some sort of scope that really gives the Life Fund the opportunity to provide services. And I also would like to add at this stage what is pointed out as the second part of that 4(2)(b) which is the:

“...treatment”—must be—“...unavailable at a local medical institution;”

So, I do not want the population to think—because I heard the Minister of Health say, and he referred to a particular instance, for example, a child that needs

blood transfusions. I think you said on a monthly basis, or weekly basis is very expensive or not, but—[*Technical difficulties*—]—pause. Certainly, no amendment being made here today captures that, because that treatment is locally available. So to be available to access the Life Fund there are number of requirements and we will get to eligibility. But one of them is and one of the main ones is why this was created, is that you must not be able to access the medical treatment locally. And that makes the point that I am about to go on to now.

What this amendment is seeking to do here, Mr. Speaker, it is to give the broadest possible powers to a Minister in a piece of legislation, certainly, that I have ever seen. I use the word “super power” not in a pejorative way but it is literally that. Because what you have as the fund is set up now, you have a board, and it talks about what the Board must do.

The Board at 9(d) says it must:

“establish procedures for applying to the Children’s Life Fund, determining the eligibility for the payment or reimbursement of medical expenses for beneficiaries and processing claim disputes;”

It goes on to say at 9(e) that the Board will:

“set and administer rules for qualification of beneficiaries in accordance with prescribed policies established by the government;”

And we will get to the next amendment being suggested at (f).

What that is doing, Mr. Speaker, and to the population, it is setting out legislatively that the Board is in charge of the administration of this Fund. But the Board will set the procedures, that the Board will determine how this Fund is accessed in accordance with the parameters of the law. And interestingly, when you go to section 14(1) which is the specific section that talks about the Minister’s powers as they currently exist under the legislation. It says:

“The Minister may give the Board, in writing, general directions in respect of the performance of its functions.”

And then it goes on at 14(2):

“The Minister may give the Board, in writing, specific directions in respect of its functions in relation to any matter which the Minister considers to be in the public interest.”

Mr. Speaker, that is very, very broad language. That is language that sets the existing legislation apart from the legislation we have looked at in the last 10 years. And it is sort of ironic, it did not pass me. I would not use the word “hypocritical” but it is ironic that for the past 10 years, once any piece of legislation came to this House, that mentioned giving a Minister a “power to sneeze” there was objection by those on the other side.

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

**Mr. S. Young SC:** But here, and this is where I caution the population. The first piece of legislation that we come to this House to debate in this new Sitting, is legislation that is giving a Minister a power with absolutely no review on it as per the legislation, “super powers”, I call it. So, you are basically giving a Minister a power to override the Board. And what is interesting about this legislation, is the Board must have:

“5(2)

- (a) a medical practitioner who is a senior public officer nominated by the Minister;”

And then also has other persons who may be doctors but it goes on, it is not left up to the Board to determine these things. The legislation actually sets up a body called the “Life Unit” and it is the Life Unit that is charged with the responsibility of considering cases put before it, and that is found at section 17(1):

“There is hereby established a Life Unit which shall provide the case management services of the Authority in respect of applications for grants for medical treatment under this Act.”

So that is the expert body. Because it says:

“The Life Unit shall comprise—

- (a) a manager;
- (b) an administrative officer;”—but
- “(c) medical volunteers;”

And when you look at the Act it is a Life Unit that is given the responsibility, the duty as the legislations says at section 18(b) to:

“undertake clinical and financial assessment of applications;”

So, there is this specialist body set up by the legislation called a Life Unit that must look at the clinical—make a clinical assessment to determine whether they should recommend to the Board that a child who meets the eligibility requirements which are set out at section 19(d), and one of which I said before:

“requires treatment that is unavailable at a local medical institution;”

And then there is a financial side. But look at the clinical side. It is a Life Unit that will determine and undertake the clinical assessment, make the recommendation to a board that is set up under the Act, with all of the authority of the Act, and a board that as the legislation currently stands, a Minister can give directions to. And as I read, section 14(2) says:

—not only can—“The Minister...give...directions...”—you know, but the Minister in the broadest possible language on any matter—

“which the Minister considers to be in the public interest.”

So, one must immediately question and begin to wonder why in the first piece of legislation to come before this House, where I accept you want to improve

what exists to give access to life saving treatment for children who need it and they cannot get it locally. But, why go to this extent to give the most extreme of powers with no oversight in the Act. And this led me to another question, and I would like the Government to consider this. This just talks about the Minister, but as we know as per the Constitution, in this instance is it a Minister acting on his or her own, in their sole discretion? It certainly seem so on the face of the Act. Or it is as we know, the Constitution sets out on occasions, the Minister acting under the general authority of the Cabinet.

So, immediately, you are faced with juxtaposition. Is the Minister with this “super power” here that is unnecessary, I submit? But understanding what you are trying to achieve because you want the opportunity for a Minister who feels, “listen, this child needs immediate attention because they cannot get it here they fulfil”—but how is the Minister determining that if the Life Fund Unit has not done so, if the Board has not looked at it, because I hear about emergency situations. I heard the Minister suggest it may be on a weekend but we all know that the Board can sit at any point in time, and actually the legislation talks about that, as the Minister accepted.

So one begins to question. Why go to this extent with the most extreme powers? And the question I am asking now, is it a Minister acting on his or her sole discretion, or is it a Minister by the definition is understood to be acting on the powers of the Cabinet? Is it then in that instance, because it is then you are saying it is not an individual determining, is it that you are going to tie Cabinet up with these decisions? Can Cabinet make these types of decisions?

And the next point, Mr. Speaker, as we all know, never make legislation on the basis of the individual who may hold the office at the time. So right now, we have a Minister of Health who is a doctor. I do not think he specializes in

paediatrics, I could be wrong, but he is a medically qualified doctor.

**5.55 p.m.**

What if that changes tomorrow? What if that changes and the Member for Barataria/San Juan finds himself there, and he is now found in a position with an emergency situation? Is he to ignore the advice of this body set up by the legislation, for obvious good reasons, this body that is set up called the life unit with the experts? Is a person who has no medical training, no medical experience, no expertise at all, with the dilemma, the disease, or whatever it is that they are being faced with at the time, the child, that Minister in his sole discretion now is being given this super power that they can override anything and they can just say, "Yes, go ahead," go off and get access to the fund? These are some of the cautions that I am concerned about, that I am sure the population would be concerned about. Because you see, in trying to better things and in trying to give access which is an admirable policy, we must be very, very careful that you are not making it worse than it is.

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

**Mr. S. Young SC:** So you have, as it is currently put before us—and maybe they will scramble now to add some more amendments that they say will come to us in committee stage that we have not seen. But now you have a Minister being given—it is suggested to this population, through the House, that this Minister be given an overriding power over the expertise of life unit and over the expertise of a board. And you talk about review and accountability, but there is nothing suggested in the amendment that is put before us in its current form, which is an amendment found at clause 6 of the Bill to insert section 21A:

“(1) Where the Board rejects an application for a grant under this Act, the Chief Executive Officer shall, within three days thereof,

submit the decision of the Board together with its reasons and all supporting documents to the Minister, for his review.”

So, you now have the Member of Parliament for La Brea, Comrade Elder—sorry, the Member for La Brea, being in his new position of Minister of Health, having been put before him now a refusal, a refusal that has gone through the life unit, that has gone through the board with medical expertise, and the Minister, who is the Minister of Health, the Member of Parliament for La Brea, is now in a position where, in his sole discretion, he must review that board, that affirmation. That is going to open up now challenges for judicial review, because you cannot limit judicial review.

So what is the reasonableness? Why are you putting one individual in that position, where you have had experts look at it? How are you not protecting the Minister by giving him or her this new super power, and worse yet, if it is because it is undefined? Is it now going to be a Minister who is acting under the general authority of the Cabinet? Law must never be made, Mr. Speaker, on the basis of an existing individual—

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

**Mr. S. Young SC:**—even in the circumstances, if the Minister of Health is a medical doctor. These are very, very specialized areas, as we heard the hon. Minister of Health referred to a couple of the life limiting illnesses set out in Schedule 3. They looked to be very, very specialized areas. They are dealing with: “Oncology”, “Cardiology”, “Paediatric surgery”, “Nephrology”, “Haematology”, “Endocrinology”. But you are limiting it, and I wait to see the amendments you have referred to.

So we have to be careful. We have to be cautious because you are moving from this life-threatening illness to limiting, as I said, the scope and calling it “life

limiting illnesses” listed in Schedule 3, which the Minister has already accepted, it seems to me; was tying his—not his hands, because it is not about him—tying the hands of whoever is the Minister of Health.

So these two—what appears to be simple suggested amendments to two areas, we immediately see a fraught with potential pitfalls. But egregious here is that in your first piece of legislation, decide to introduce this concept of an unreviewable Minister with absolute discretion, absolute power to override experts and to take decisions, because now when you look at 21B, as it is suggested, the new clause 21B:

- “(1) Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act, the Minister may in urgent or exceptional circumstances, consider and treat with an application for a grant if the Minister is satisfied that:
- (a) the Board is unable to meet for any reason or otherwise perform its functions in a timely manner...”

Pause. What could that possibly be? What situation could it possibly be that a responsible board—this is what they now send? I cannot read that when I am on my legs. Have a little more curtesy to us next time.

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter and crosstalk*]

**Mr. S. Young SC:**

- “21B (1) Notwithstanding any other provision of this Act, the Minister may in urgent or exceptional circumstances, consider and treat with an application for a grant if the Minister is satisfied that:
- (a) the Board is unable to meet for any reason or otherwise perform its functions...”

So the board that was selected, because I presume the Government intends to select boards based on merit, boards based on expertise—I mean, it is a wide

presumption, but I presume that is what would happen, especially with the Children's Life Fund—

**Hon. Members:** *[Interruption]*

**Mr. S. Young SC:**—is it that a Minister—

**Hon. Members:** *[Interruption]*

**Mr. Speaker:** Okay. Can we allow the Member to finish his contribution? He just has five minutes again.

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

**Mr. S. Young SC:** So, is it that the Minister—

**Hon. Members:** *[Interruption]*

**Mr. Speaker:** Continue. Member, can I, not entering the debate of course, just ask you to read the provision in its entirety? You seem to be leaving out the last part of the sentence.

**Mr. S. Young SC:** I am not leaving out any—thank you, Mr. Speaker, but I was going through it word by word and I have not reached the last sentence as yet. B comes after A, which is what I will get to now.

So the Minister is satisfied that B—

**Mr. Speaker:** Sorry to interrupt you, I will give you back the time, but I meant the entire sentence of A, just so that we correct the public record.

**Mr. S. Young SC:** Yes. So the entire clause. So 21B—I have gone through 21B(1)(a). So the first provision is:

“...the Minister is satisfied that:

- (a) the Board is unable to meet for any reason or otherwise perform its functions in a timely manner...”

So, immediately, we see the potential of a Minister now having to go to court to defend that in its particularity. Because the Minister now will be required to give

evidence in court, be subject to cross-examination to prove that he or she knew that the board was unable to meet. Then the action is required in the public interest in furtherance of the purpose of this Act, trying to tie it back.

Then we go to 21B(2):

“Where the Minister acts pursuant to subsection (1), he shall notify-

(a) the Board...”

What is the use of notifying the board? You have just said, “de board cyah meet, de board eh functioning, is exceptional circumstances, de board gone”—according to the Member for Baratavia/San Juan—“to de golf course or gone for ah swim somewhere”, so the Minister now has to make a decision. After the Minister makes that decision without any protection of expert advice, expertise around him or her, which could be set out in the Act to protect the Minister, he or she must now notify the board, or where the board is not constituted, the Chief Executive Officer of the decision taken and the reasons for doing so within seven days of the decision.

So, again, you are putting the Minister in a very, very difficult, unenviable position; putting the Minister in a position, “Ay, you, have the power, the sole power, the sole discretion, make a decision now because we cannot find the board, we cannot find the experts,” and then telling him or her, “And just tell them within seven day.” What is the purpose? What is the board going to do in seven days? Overturn the decision you have already taken? It is nonsensical. It is an attempt to try and introduce accountability or transparency, but the horse is bolted—

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

**Mr. S. Young SC:**—because you have taken the decision, Minister. Protect yourself.

So here you have, Mr. Speaker—

**Mr. Speaker:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. S. Young SC:**—in normal speaking time. So here you have—so I will take the extra time, Mr. Speaker. I would not use the whole time but I will take it.

**Mr. Speaker:** I rather suspect you will ask for the extra time.

**Mr. S. Young SC:** I will ask for the extra time—

**Mr. Speaker:** You are welcome.

**Mr. S. Young SC:**—or the use of the extra time.

So, Mr. Speaker, we have already seen that there are a number of difficulties and a number of dangers that we caution the Government about with respect to the current proposed amendments. And I will use the remaining time that I have—let me just, first of all, touch on a number—just a few—of the issues raised by the hon. Minister in piloting this piece of legislation. He said—the hon. Minister said, quote:

Needs to be addressed, these amendments will address that in some meaningful ways

—when he was talking about the processing time. You said it was 70 days to 85 days and the amendments, as they currently are, would somehow address those.

The Bill that we have before us, Minister, unfortunately, does no such thing. All the Bill that we have before us is doing is limiting the types of treatment that is now applicable to that section, Schedule 3, and then also is giving the Minister these wide, wide super discretionary powers that we are uncertain whether it is due to his or her sole discretion, or the Cabinet, but in any event, it is overriding what the parent legislation talks about, which is the life unit and the board and the expertise that exist there. So certainly, it may be in what has just been passed up, further amendments that are being proposed now, but it certainly is not captured in what is currently before us and what was provided to us two days ago.

Then the Minister went on to say, Mr. Speaker, the Government is trying to improve efficiency by making the process faster. That is a bit of the same point that I was just making, that nothing in the current amendments in the Bill before us actually does that. There is nothing to do in there that is improving efficiency. I think the Minister has accepted that there are more limitations than just limiting the access, the eligibility to Schedule 3 alone. And I was just drawing as well attention to the eligibility clause, in particular when you spoke about blood transfusions and these types of things, to remind that as it currently is, one of the main eligibility conditions is that it must be treatment that you cannot get locally.

Let us get on now to some of the caution I would like to put, because you see, this fund has run into serious difficulties before and in fact, difficulties that led to criminal investigation and criminal charges. So when you look at the *Newsday* of the 12<sup>th</sup> of November, 2015, you see a story by Miranda La Rose; the *Newsday* of 12<sup>th</sup> of November, 2015:

The Life Fund File for the DPP.

And that story talks about investigations into an alleged fraud at the life fund in which thousands of US dollars were literally embezzled. So one questions, do you do anything here that is going to affect the oversight of the life unit and the financial assessments that it does, as well as the board, and put the Minister in a position where maybe some public servant, as happened in this instance, is pushing pieces of papers in front of the Minister saying, “Hey, we cannot get in touch with the board, we cannot find them but this is an emergency situation and you need to make a decision now,” that when you unravel it, becomes an issue of fraud?

**6.10 p.m.**

And we would see with that particular instance the Prime Minister, and this is now in 2015—a *Guardian* report by Radhica Sookraj,

“Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, has admitted that she and Health Minister Dr. Fuad Khan were notified by letter that thousands of US dollars had allegedly been embezzled out of the Children's Life Fund. last year.

The...PM was”—actually written to by the—“then CEO. of the Children's Life Fund. Authority, Genevieve Madoo, on May 7, 2014.”

That went on, just to close it off, to not only be a charge after police investigation, but the person who had embezzled the thousands of US dollars, using the Children's Life Fund was actually convicted.

So one of the other cautions and especially looking at this emergency provision that you are putting on the Minister, the super power takes us now to an article written by Mark Bassant on 7 July, 2015, in the *Daily Express* under the heading “Deaths under query” and this one needs to be a particular caution. Because what you had is public servants identifying a particular hospital in this instance in Colombia and literally convincing parents no longer to use treatment that the child in question had been getting in the United States, and literally forcing the process for this hospital in Colombia with a number of children, one questions the reason why that particular hospital. But in this instance unfortunately it led to tragedy and death of the children because they did not get the type of treatment in Colombia again.

It is relevant in this context, because you are putting all of this onto a Minister where as you have legislation, the parent legislation that sets out expertise with a life unit and the board, so we need to be cautious here. Do not put a Minister in that type of position. Trying to make haste to do something which you think is good but it turns out not only to be bad for the taxpayer but within this instance. Because as the legislation talks, it is life or death for a child, that is what you are talking about. And the legislation here is talking about those instances.

“Concerns were raised by local doctors about one of the Colombian medical institutions sanctioned by the Children’s Life Fund Authority, where sick children will be sent for urgent medical treatment. The concern surfaced this year following the deaths of at least two local children at the Colombian facility...”

And that is what happened in that instance. Unfortunately, all of these instances took period of a particular period of time. So I am cautioning in your haste to grant super power, in your haste to open up in a much wider way and I heard the Minister say, because the legislation as it currently is also caps medical treatment at a million dollars. I think I heard the Minister say in his contribution and again it may be in the papers that were just passed to us—a further amendment but I heard the Minister say that they would be looking at expanding it to allow treatment beyond a million dollars. There must be justification for that type of instance and why you are going down that road, if in fact you are.

So Mr. Speaker, there is caution from us on this side, whilst we think it is admirable and a good policy decision to have the Children’s Life Fund, as we have seen from just a few examples and there are many more—the past history during a particular period in time it was unfortunately caught up in fraud that led to criminal charges and a conviction is caught up in a particular shuffle of people towards a foreign institution that led to death and one must be very, very carefully and I question why in the first piece of legislation to come to House in this new sitting, you are looking to introduce. Is it a test to see how far you can push the envelope going forward with further legislation but it is certainly not something that should be done in an instance like this. Because not only does it expand powers on one person but it could also potentially put that Minister, he or she in some serious problems. So Mr. Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to have made that

contribution.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Couva South.

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

**The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath):** Thank you Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, for 10 years while I served as the Member for Princes Town, sitting on the other side of the House, I clamoured for the amendment together with our Prime Minister now, then Leader of the Opposition, while children suffered and died at the hands of our colleagues who refused to amend the Children's Life Fund.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Today is a historic day, Mr. Speaker. It is a historic day because the Children's Life Fund, the vision for creating the Children's Life Fund came from the Member for Siparia. And it was the Member for Siparia whose brain child it was to create this fund to ensure the pain and the suffering of not only the children who are afflicted with life threatening conditions, but the families and the loved ones who endured months, weeks, days, years of pain and suffering because they were unable to meet financially, the constraints that they experienced as it related to saving or attempting to save the life of their child.

Mr. Speaker, in the general election campaign of 2025, I recall fondly that the Member for Siparia said something to me that has stayed with me from then to now. And what she said to me then, was that, why do we do what we do? Why do we fight as hard as we fight? Why do we continue to give public service? And rhetorically, she answered the question for me and she said "you know why?" She said "because of our children."

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** She said “what is the most important thing to you?” She said to me “what is the most important thing to you, is it not your child?” So I said “yes”. And so she said “for each and every one of us, who are parents, there is nothing like seeing your child suffer and you are unable to do anything about it, and that is why I continue to do the work and persevere and pioneer for the rights and protection of children.”

Mr. Speaker, I was very surprised that the Opposition chose the Member for Port of Spain North/ St. Ann's West to be their first contributor to this Bill and I will tell you why. For 10 years the Member sat on this side of the House but never one day while the Member for Siparia and myself advocated for amendments to be made to the Children's Life Fund, to benefit our nation's children—never one day did the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West lend his voice in support for any amendments to be made to the Children's Life Fund.

**Hon. Senators:** [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. B. Padarath:** And when the Member wants to speak about hypocrisy that is the hypocrisy, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, forgive me if I seem a little impassioned, but I will tell you why in my contribution, why I take the Children's Life Fund so seriously together with the Member for Siparia.

The Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West raised several issues and while the Member for the past 10 years could not find his voice because he suffered from “pip” during that period.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** On the issue of the Children's Life Fund, there were other Members who sat alongside the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West

on this Bench who are no longer here, and two of those former Members were the Member for St. Joseph, then Minister of Health, one Terrence Deyalsingh, the other being the Member for San Fernando West, then Mr. Faris Al-Rawi who served as Attorney General for a significant period of the People's National Movement administration between 2015 to 2025.

**6.20 p.m.**

But you see, Mr. Speaker, the then Member for St. Joseph, who served as the Minister of Health during that period, I recall the day we were leaving for the last Sitting in the House of Representatives prior to the last general election. The then Member for St. Joseph, like the emperor without clothes, sat there with sanctimonious hypocrisy telling the then and now—the Member for Oropouche West then, the Member for Fyzabad now, “What happen, like you want to spend five more years in Opposition?” Mr. Speaker, if that is not poetic justice that the Member is no longer a Member of this House, I do not know what is.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** And I will tell you why, because that Member too, the former Member for St. Joseph, the former Minister of Health, who had the opportunity to say to Trinidad and Tobago that we were willing to work with our colleagues across the aisle. Because, Mr. Speaker, the amendments to the Children's Life Fund Bill require political will. That is what it requires, and today, the very first Bill that comes to the House of Representatives under the Member for Siparia, serving in her second term as the Prime Minister—the first and now the second female Prime Minister of this country, has signaled to the population very clearly what her priority is. And, her priority has always been from the time that she served as Attorney General in 1995, to Minister of Education in '98/'99, then going into Opposition, back as Prime Minister in 2010/2015, now, once more in

the seat of Prime Minister, has said to her Government that the children of Trinidad and Tobago are our top priority

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** But you see, Mr. Speaker, while the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West regaled us about how concerned the Opposition are for children, the Member sat two seats away from the Minister of Health in his own administration, and instead of adding his voice in support on several occasions when we raised that the Children's Life Fund needed specific review, support for additional amendments, not one word coming from the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West.

Not one word, and the Member raised a very interesting question. The Member said, "Why are we giving the Minister this superpower," as he described it. I want to remind the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West how we arrived at that situation, and at that point. Because you see, Mr. Speaker, our colleagues, our friends opposite, they seem to suffer from selective hearing and today they have been very selective, hoping that the population will forgive them in quick order.

**Mr. Tancoo:** Never.

**Hon. B. Padarath:** The population will not forget the millions and billions of dollars as identified today by the Prime Minister through the Auditor General's Report, spent on frivolity, spent on white elephants, spent on the interest of friends, financiers, and family of the People's National Movement and no colleague opposite can separate themselves from what occurred between 2015 to 2025.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** The Member for Arouca/Lopinot cannot separate himself. The Member for Arima certainly cannot separate herself, because, I want to remind

Trinidad and Tobago that the Member for Arima was part of that administration, and while she may be new—the hon. Member that is—

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:**—to the position of Leader of the Opposition, I too cannot recall one instance when the Member sat on this side of the House that the Member said, “But this is for children. This is for our nation’s children.” Instead, the Member for Arima, now the Leader of Opposition, chose to toe the line of the Member for Diego Martin West because it was politically expedient for the Member to do so.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** And therefore, when colleagues stand on that side of the House to lecture us on moral and spiritual and ethical values, if you cannot have compassion for children, then God help us. God help us if they ever return to Government.

**Mr. Tancoo:** Never.

**Hon. B. Padarath:** They have demonstrated, not by their words, you know, they have demonstrated by their deeds. Mr. Speaker, 2015 to 2025, not one amendment to the Children’s Life Fund in the span of almost 10 years. The Member for Arouca/Lopinot, the Member for Arima, the Member for Diego Martin North/East, the Member for St. Ann’s East, who once wanted to school me about how to raise my own child today, for 10 years he had nothing to say—the Hon. Member that is—about the welfare of the children of Trinidad and Tobago who suffered under their hands, many of whom passed away, not being able to receive the life-saving surgeries.

The Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West was in the Attorney General’s Office for a significant period of time. The Member for Port of

Spain/South, they often leaned on him for advice in the area of law. The Member for Trincity/Maloney was one in this position as Leader of Government Business, not once advancing a piece of legislation. But, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Siparia today made sure that the very first act that she was committed to was bringing amendments to save our nation's children.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill, 2025, has nothing to do with any personal interest or anyone on this side of the House. But in other incarnations, when our colleagues or friends were here on this side of the House, there were things that you would hear very often, one of which was NCB Global Finance. You heard about that institution. You heard about the recusals from former Members of the Government, some serving in the highest positions. However, Mr. Speaker—

**Mr. Young SC:** Mr. Speaker 48(1), what is the relevance of that?

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Because we are talking about the expenditure of the Children's Life Fund.

**Mr. Young SC:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Okay, is your objection on the ground of relevance?

**Mr. Young SC:** Yes.

**Mr. Speaker:** Okay, the way I see it is this.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** I think you need to lend context to what the Member is saying. So, I will allow him a very brief respite from it, but in context, in the context of expenditure and expenditure alone.

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Thank you Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, we are speaking about the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill. There is the operational side, our Members

will speak, and I will speak, about the clauses in this Bill. But there must be the context as you have described, in terms of what is the priority of the State in terms of bringing this Bill today and the context in which we find ourselves with respect to the specific amendment. And that is why I can tell you that the commitment demonstrated by this Government for our nation's children is very different from our colleagues opposite. Because while we are not advancing our own self-interest, I cannot say that colleagues on the other side did not do that when they were in our position.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** You know, Mr. Speaker, the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West got very jumpy when we spoke and made reference to NCB Global Finance. And, as a side note, I want to indicate that every dealing with respect to NCB Global Finance is now being investigated.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** It is now being investigated and the hon. Attorney General will speak more to that, about persons who were more interested in filling the pockets of their friends, financiers, family, instead of looking after the interest of the most vulnerable in our nation's society.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West told us earlier about the superpowers, and the Member spent a significant amount of time about what the superpowers that we are seeking to give to the Minister. And the Member indicated that the Government, the then Opposition, prior to April 28, 2025, made a lot of sound and fury about powers being given to Ministers. But the Member stopped short of putting that point into context, because when it came to giving Ministers of Government superpowers to look into

citizen's taxes through the BIR, it is where we had a problem by giving Ministers superpowers. And, I recall it was the Member for Diego Martin North/East who sought to give himself that superpower of being able to go to the BIR to get certain pieces of information and that is what the then Opposition, now Government, rejected. We rejected that, Mr. Speaker, because again it could not be that one was serving their own interest, whether it is political or otherwise.

We had a problem with giving superpowers to Ministers from the last administration as it relates to Customs and Excise. Again, who was the Minister that brought Bills to this House seeking to give the Minister of Finance, who is the line Minister, the power to do certain things in Customs and Excise that was really outside the remit of saving lives compared to what we are trying to do with my colleague from Oropouche West and other colleagues from time to time who will find themselves as the Minister of Health.

I want to remind the population through you, Mr. Speaker, that it was not this Government, the then Opposition, who made a song and dance trying to give Ministers of National Security powers onto themselves that they will be able to receive sensitive information from the state apparatus as it relates to national security agencies under their purview. It was not this Government. But you see my colleagues opposite bend their heads in shame, and they have a right to bend their heads in shame.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** They have a right to bend their heads in shame because when the then Opposition, now Government, raised the issue of giving Ministers that superpower, it was in the interest of, one, the separation of powers in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. Two, it had to do with ensuring that the political arm was not interfering in areas that they should not be interfering in. And thirdly, Mr.

Speaker, the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West said, "Well you do not legislate for today, you legislate for tomorrow and the thereafter because anyone can be sitting in the position of Minister and therefore you would want to ensure that person is insulated from any perceived bias or interference."

Mr. Speaker, we saw for 10 years the Members opposite were callous, boldface, brass-face, and unashamedly sought to bring power unto themselves through legislation in this Parliament that did not look after the interest of the wellbeing of the citizens, particularly children, as we are doing today with respect to the children's Life fund (Amdt.) Bill.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** The Member opposite used the words that we should be careful and that we should be cautious. We should be careful and we should be cautious going forward, giving Ministers these sorts of powers. Mr. Speaker, when you look at the Bill and you look at the amendments that are being proposed, you spend a lot of time—and I am very grateful—Mr. Speaker, I am not seeking to bring you into the debate, but for a long time in this House, there was an absence—and I will make no apologies for saying that—there was an absence of contextualizing a lot of what was being said, whether it was right or wrong.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** But today, sensibility has returned to the House of Representatives.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** And when the Member opposite spoke about "We must be careful and we must be cautious with the powers that we are giving a Minister," you look at the Bill, you look at the amendments in context, one dancing with the other.

**6.35 p.m.**

Mr. Speaker, it has to be ludicrous for anyone to think that the Minister of Health or anyone else, as opposed to the Member for Oropouche West, anyone else sitting in the position of Minister of Health looking at the powers that are being proposed to be given to the Minister of Health, will work in a vacuum and just decide that an application has come or that he or she will just simply accept and say proceed, without understanding that they require technical advice coming from the Board. In terms of what the recommendation is, if there is a recommendation from the Board, technical advice coming from the senior consultant of the paediatric unit, technical advice and support coming from doctors from within the RHA that is responsible, accepting and seeking technical advice from external parties, whether it is from within his own Ministry or senior doctors.

One has to be ludicrous to think anybody who is sitting in the position of Minister of Health will just “vaps”. That probably occurred under the pharmacist that they had as Minister of Health. That will not occur under the Minister of Health, Member for Oropouche West.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** You know, Mr. Speaker, I recall earlier that we were told when we sat on that side of the House, to leave Siparia right there. We have brought Siparia to this side of the House; rather, Siparia has brought us to this side of the House. But the hon. Prime Minister has been very careful in the selection of the persons that she entrusts with the welfare and the health particularly of our nation's children.

Mr. Speaker, you know it is probably fortuitous that the Member for Siparia is making her way—she left for a few minutes, she is now making her way back into the Chamber but, again, it was because of the vision of the Member for

Siparia, that is why we are here today and we are happy to have her right here. She is not going anywhere. She is not going anywhere.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, I want to refer to a comment that was made by my colleague, the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West, saying why are we giving the Minister all of this power, we must be cautious, we must make sure that we know what we are doing. Well, one, yes, in this instance, the Minister of Health was a health professional, you have the Minister in the Ministry also having been a health professional. You have several Members on this side of the House, well-acclaimed senior doctors having served in our public health system. But the Prime Minister always says—you know the Prime Minister is a lawyer. She always says that we will not advise ourselves and therefore that is why we made the point. You are dependent on senior technocrats, consultants, the people who will be responsible for providing the support. This is not a one-man show. The colleagues opposite ran Ministries as a one-man and a one-woman show and that is why very little or nothing occurred in the last 10 years.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** You know, the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West spent a lot of time quoting from newspaper articles and I started off by saying we must remind ourselves how did we arrive at the position that we are in today, 10 years later. I am putting it into context, there is an article, with your permission, Mr. Speaker, I seek leave to quote from a *Newsday* article dated Saturday, 18 June, 2016 and the headline said:

“Child dies as State considers legal question”

I want to repeat that, Mr. Speaker, because while we got a lot of advice from the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West who had not one word to say

about the Children's Life Fund in the last 10 years but suddenly has arrived on the scene trying to soften his own image after the licking they got in the last general election—

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:**—attempting to appear as though they are interested in children when for 10 years, they did nothing as this headline indicates. The headline says: “Child dies as State considers legal question”

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And who was the legal officer?

**Hon. B. Padarath:** The legal officer that sat in the Office of the Attorney General was then one Faris Al-Rawi, then Member for San Fernando West. But, Mr. Speaker, just to refresh your memory and the memory of the people who are looking on, then Attorney General had a junior Minister in the Ministry of the Attorney General at that time.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Who was that?

**Hon. B. Padarath:** And, Mr. Speaker, you might be shocked, you might be very shocked, alarmed to know that while my colleague from Port of Spain North/St Ann's West attempted to cry and sympathize with all of those who suffered as a result of not getting any assistance, some having perished, the person who served as the junior Minister in the Office of the Attorney General when this headline came out, “Child dies as State considers legal question”, was none other than the Member for Port of Spain North/St Ann's West.

**Hon. Members:** “Nooo...No.”

**Hon. B. Padarath:** So when the Member wants to talk about hypocrisy, when the Member wants to tell this side about hypocrisy, respectfully through you, Mr. Speaker, the hon. Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West might want to take a look in the mirror, might want to take a look in the mirror.

Mr. Speaker, the article says:

“Parliament yesterday heard that a one-year-old child – Navene Harripersad...”

And the Member for Oropouche West, through you, Mr. Speaker, this may almost be a bit of poetic justice. You can never find anything good coming out of a child or anyone that perishes but today serving as the Member for Oropouche West, I retell this story knowing that the child that I referred to was from the constituency of Oropouche West.

Mr. Speaker, it said:

“Parliament yesterday heard that a one-year-old child – Navene Harripersad – died while the State was seeking legal advice from the Ministry of the Attorney General on the question of the interpretation of laws governing the Children's Life Fund (CLF). It is understood the legal issue involved two words...”

Mr. Speaker, the article says that the issue involved was about two words, two words:

“...in the law which were key to determining whether the child would qualify for a second surgical procedure needed after an initial procedure was funded by the State.

The issue was whether Navene's case would qualify as an exception to a ban on a second set of funding within the space of two years.”

The article dated June 16<sup>th</sup>, *Newsday* went on to say:

“During Question Time, Princes Town MP Barry Padarath asked Attorney General Faris Al-Rawi if a legal issue had been resolved in relation to the fund.

Al-Rawi said, ‘Yes’. Padarath asked, ‘What mechanisms have been put in

place by your office to ensure that a reoccurrence similar to this does not occur again?' The Attorney General said, 'There is no need for mechanisms...'"

This is what they said in 2016 when the child died. They failed to give a legal opinion on two words. Al-Rawi said:

“‘There is no need for mechanisms because the phenomenon is one which was unique to this particular situation’.”

**Mr. Speaker:** You have two more minutes.

**Hon. B. Padarath:** May I take my extended—?

**Mr. Speaker:** You shall.

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. He said between 2010 to 2016, several persons had applied. It also went to say that the Member for Siparia interjected, lending her support on this issue. The records will show very clearly that we have never deviated from our original precision which was really meant to help particularly those, but not limited to, those who were constrained because of financial constraint, to seek medical advice, particularly for children, on issues that locally, there was no treatment available for.

Mr. Speaker, I want to give you an instance about the level of commitment and that is why today, there are a few amendments to the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill. There are two that we have brought initially and there are a few that we will put on the Floor of the Parliament as we continue. One yes, does seek to give the context to the involvement of the Minister. It also seeks to give beta thalassemia and several other conditions, consideration for access to the Children's Life Fund.

Mr. Speaker, I can remember it like yesterday, the very first instance that came to the Children's Life Fund. Sitting at her desk at 10.00 p.m. one night at the

Prime Minister's Office, Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Member for Siparia, in 2010, received a letter on her desk from a parent who was asking for the exact same thing of which we are doing today, to expedite the case of a child because they thought it was just taking a little too long. We had just been in Government for about two to three months at that time. Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, Member for Siparia, took up the letter and the child was from the constituency of St Ann's East. It was not a child from Siparia or a child from Couva South, it was a child from an Opposition constituency, very first child in the Children's Life Fund, St Ann's East.

Prime Minister gave me the letter at 10 o'clock in the night, five minutes later, she looks up and she says, "What are you still doing here?" I said, "Prime Minister, it is 10 o'clock". She said, "What does that have to do with anything?" I said, "well, I will seek to sort it out in the morning". Prime Minister then looked at me and she said, "Are you a parent"? At that time, I was not. She said, "Let me tell you something, call them now, because if I know what the heart of any parent is like, they will not be asleep. They will be anxiously waiting for a phone call at any time".

I called those parents in front of Prime Minister and those parents wept at 10 o'clock that night just knowing that their child will have the chance of life.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** That is the compassion, that is what drives the Member for Siparia to continue doing what she does and that is why when we were told to keep Siparia right there, Siparia has brought us right here and she will remain right here.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** She has brought us right here and that is why today she can tell you without fear of contradiction, where her heart lies in terms of the welfare

of children of Trinidad and Tobago, but where the mandate that we have been given through the 26 seats for the United National Congress, our friends in the TPP, our two brothers who are sitting on this side of the House, seeking the interest of the people above self and that is what this Bill is all about.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, months later I received a postcard from the parents of that child who was the first of recipient of the Children's Life Fund. It was a Christmas time and the postcard simply read, "unfortunately, my daughter died, having received the surgery in Argentina". "However, please convey to the hon. Prime Minister that as a parent, I can rest comfortably at night knowing that my child had every opportunity to live and that she wanted for nothing but it was left up to the Lord's will and the Lord's hands".

Mr. Speaker, we often say in Trinidad and Tobago, in local parlance, God helps those who help themselves, and today we are helping ourselves by giving many of our nation's children the opportunity to live and if that is not a noble gesture, not seeking fame, the Member for Siparia but understanding what it is like to come particularly from a rural constituency, bundling bhagee and bodi in the market to put herself through school but sitting here today as the second female Prime Minister, ensuring that she seeks the interest of the most vulnerable.

The Prime Minister always gives me a story about when she just became an MP, about a child who had a hole in his heart and she raised bake sales, barbeque, et cetera, to be able to send—because in those days, there was no Life Fund and it was from then to now that the hon. Prime Minister and this Government has ensured that we will put our nation's children first.

**6.50 p.m.**

Mr. Speaker, I will give you, as I wrap up in my last couple of minutes, the

operational elements, as the Attorney General, the Prime Minister and others may contribute with the specifics of the clause. One other issue that I raised for 10 years was the operational arm of the Children's Life Fund.

Between the period 2015—2025, I would visit that Children's Life Fund almost as though I were living there on the instructions of the Member for Siparia. Anyone who needed assistance in filling out the forms, knowing how to manoeuvre the Children's Life Fund in terms of the application process, was sent and accompanied by myself, the Member for Princes Town at that time, on the instructions of the Member for Siparia. That is how committed the Member for Siparia is to ensuring that people are able to access the Children's Life Fund.

But on the first day I visited there, there was one OJT running the Children's Life Fund office. And the applications simple—an application form was not being given to parents because that one OJT will determine if you can get a form or not. I came back, and I raised that as an urgent question in this House. The then Member for St. Joseph, Minister of Health, then as he was, for 10 years, sat on his hands and did nothing, and my colleagues opposite remained quiet for 10 years when I raised the issue of the lack of staffing and under-resourcing of the Children's Life Fund.

Year after year, after year, my colleague from Chaguanas East and myself would come to this House and speak time to time about the under-resourcing and the understaffing of the Children's Life Fund. And, Mr. Speaker, I am almost certain that the hon. Prime Minister, she has already told us that we have to ensure that legislation is just half of it, the other half she wants us to ensure that this is operationalized in the shortest period of time. And she has given her commitment, on behalf of the Government, to support the Children's Life Fund, again, not just in word, but in deed, and that is commendable.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** That is commendable, especially when the hon. Prime Minister has told us today what the Auditor General's report contains. So, while they found the resources for rentals that nobody occupied—and we will speak more about that in the mid-year review. While they found the resources to ensure that friends, family, and financiers were enriched, they found no resources for the Children's Life Fund.

I recall, I think it was last year, \$5million coming down to the end, scrambling—the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, today, said that the Government was scrambling. We are very prepared because we know what we have to do, and we have the political will to do it.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** If anybody was scrambling, it was my friends opposite. Because they were advancing self-interest, family interest and financier interest as opposed to the interest of who? The most vulnerable, the children who fell under the Children's Life Fund. Mr. Speaker, today, I am very happy, I am overjoyed, I am elated.

You know, I remember the Member for Diego Martin North/East said, sometimes it gives them intestinal digestive problems, and they must probably be at pain. So, while they smirk, and they grin, and they make us feel that they are happy for the children of Trinidad and Tobago, by their actions between 2015 to 2025—and we must judge them by what they do, and not by what they say. Mamaguy and cry have been the mantra of my colleagues opposite. Never on any occasion have they demonstrated through deed, whether it was to bring amendments to the Children's Life Fund or to lend financial support, sufficiently, to have the Children's Life Fund operationalized in the way in which it was meant

to do, have they ever committed to do. And therefore, Mr. Speaker, we will do what they have refused to do, and that is why—

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:**—Trinidad and Tobago ensured that they got rid of former Member for St. Joseph once, Terrence Deyalsingh, ensuring that he is no longer the Minister of Health. He was referred to as the “Minister of death”.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** And that will be the legacy, because I can tell you, they will not be returning to this House.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** The people of Trinidad and Tobago, and the children of Trinidad and Tobago, who will now benefit from the Children's Life Fund, will never forgive them. Young one-year-old, Navene Harripersad, should have never been able to be in a position to succumb to the conditions that he suffered at one year old because of financial constraints.

Mr. Speaker, I am happy, when I look down the aisle, and I see the Member for San Fernando West today is a decent man—

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:**—a man who has the children's welfare and interest at his core, a man who will ensure that his constituents will not suffer the fate as little baby Miracle in 2016.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** But, Mr. Speaker, I will tell you that while we have Prime Minister who ensures we have decent people like San Fernando West and St. Joseph, some of those faces who brought about the recklessness, the callousness, today, have returned in another place, and if that is the type of leadership that we

can expect from our friends opposite, then God help us.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, Mr. Speaker, 48(6).

**Mr. Speaker:** Improper motive, imputation?

**Mr. Gonzales:** Yes.

**Mr. Speaker:** I am not a fan of perfunctory rulings, but in this case, I think it is a real stretch to say that it is an imputation of an improper motive. Carry on.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, I want to encourage my colleague to get accustomed to that seat. I noticed today my colleague spent a lot of time jumping up and down like “Jack in a box”.

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:** But today, we are here about the serious business of the children of Trinidad and Tobago, and I am very happy, as the Member for Couva South with all 27 colleagues, including the hon. Prime Minister, for bringing this Bill as our first Bill, our flagship Bill—

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

**Hon. B. Padarath:**—in the second incarnation of the first female Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, the Member for Siparia, who has been affectionately dubbed the mother of our nation, and today, with this Bill, I can understand why. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for St. Ann's East.

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

**Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly** (*St. Ann's East*): Thank you kindly, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I noticed that when someone was asked—one of our colleagues was asked what would be the atmosphere in the House today, the Member for Couva

South said, it would be hot and heavy. And I wondered what is so hot and heavy about a parliamentary Sitting where we gather to discuss the business of this country, but clearly, the Member came prepared to bring “hot and heavy” into the Parliament debate today.

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

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** But it is interesting that the Government was not as prepared, even with the first flagship Bill that they brought, because were it not for the intervention of my friend from Port of Spain North/St Ann's West—

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

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:**—they would have brought to this House a Bill that would have contradicted exactly what they were trying to do. So it makes one wonder how ready and prepared they were. And it makes you wonder if it was more emphasis on the “hot and heavy” or more emphasis on the children that they insist they will defend.

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

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Mr. Speaker, the People's National Movement has always stood in the defence of children, whether it is education, or whether—

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

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:**—it is to bring a child marriage Bill that protects the children of this country.

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

**Mr. Morris:** Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 48(1). Standing Order 48(1); 48(1)—

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

**Mr. Morris:** Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, this Bill is about the Children's Life Fund, not child marriage. Relevance, 48(1). Mr. Speaker, 48(1).

**Mr. Speaker:** All right. Let us resist the temptation to reduce the House into a

glorified sandbox or a glorified fish market, and let us please make our points in a respectful and dignified manner. Member for Mayaro, I do not agree with you. I think it is a tangential issue, but I will give the Member—[*Inaudible*]

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

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, the People's National Movement has always stood in the defence of children, whether it is education policy—

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

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:**—whether it is the child marriage Bill. And I wonder why my colleagues are so jumpy. Maybe it is because it is recalled that at that time, “it hot and heavy”. At that time, it was a hot and heavy debate. And I remember a temporary Senator being sworn in by the UNC Government, a stain on this Parliament, a stain in the other House.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, I am going to have to ask you to use a somewhat more anodyne phrase to describe that. Because to suggest that a temporary Senator was sworn in and thereafter, it is a stain on the Parliament, it leaves any reasonable and fair-minded observer to come to the conclusion that there was something amiss about that. So, either you clear it up or you withdraw it.

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. The temporary Senator sworn in at the time was very much in support of child marriage, and that is what I consider, and that is why I said it was a stain on the Parliament—

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

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:**—because the People's National Movement did share that view.

**Mr. Speaker:** I do not accept it, and I will ask you to withdraw it.

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Thank you. You asked me to, sorry?

**Mr. Speaker:** I am asking you to withdraw the conclusion that it was a stain on the Parliament.

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Mr. Speaker, I withdraw that it was a stain on the Parliament, and I will move on.

**Mr. Speaker:** Thank you.

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Mr. Speaker, if one listens to the contribution of the Member for Couva South, you will believe that the Children's Life Fund was closed-down, shut down, and not available for the children of this country. We, on this side, the People's National Movement, we have always said we will support good legislation, and the Children's Life Fund is a good thing. Therefore, we supported it, and we continued to support it, even in the last 10 years, to fund it and to ensure that children received the benefit of the Children's Life Fund.

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

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** So, we reject totally this notion that there was no support for the Children's Life Fund by the People's National Movement. In fact, as said before, if it was not for the intervention of the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, then will be "spinning top in mud" in this Parliament, even today. So that alone says that the People's National Movement has the children of this country at heart, as we always have.

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

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** But I noticed that in the last contribution, there was a lot of bluster, very, very loud, almost a sandbox, Mr. Speaker. But there was little said about the salient fact dealing with the powers of the Minister, and that is one of the most important parts of this. Because the People's National Movement is in support of the expansion to children who would not have received the benefit of

the fund before, most certainly because we would like—my own constituency—the Member spoke about one. I personally know about two children in my own constituency that benefitted from this fund and therefore, we are happy to support the expansion, even as we were happy to give some guidance on how it could be achieved.

However, we are still concerned, and we will raise the concern about the sweeping powers that have been ascribed to the Minister because that could be the wedge in the door. If that is the test piece, then one wonders what could come next. The issue really is that there is a structure in place for the consideration of applications to the Fund, and that structure involves very qualified professionals.

The Chairman is a lecturer in emergency medicine, specialist training, certification in advanced paediatric emergency. The CEO, and all of these people who sit on the Board, they have been in practice for over 20 years in general paediatrics. Another member of the Board—and this is all public knowledge. These are the qualifications of the people that sit on the Board.

**7.05 p.m.**

Another member holds a masters in health; a paediatric medicine specialist; other board members, senior public officer as a medical practitioner; senior public officer in finance; senior public officer Tobago Affairs; a representative of the Tobago House of Assembly.

So the Board comprises very strong medical and clinical experience and expertise along with administrative and financial expertise. This is the board to whom applications go and then there is an administrative structure to consider these applications. And the fact that a board made up of this type of clinical, administrative, financial strength could be bypassed and that could be put into legislation that is something that is worrying. And why? Because we have other

public institutions that give grants that approve processes, that are valued much less than these. And there are formal, established procedures for reconsideration of denied applications in place.

And I want to mention a couple of these because if the question is that a denial should have a chance to be relooked then there are other ways, established ways that already exist in the public service, that can assist to make it into a more formal process, a more transparent process. Because it is not chicken feed that we are dealing with, it is tens of millions of dollars and as the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West raised, there have been issues of fraud associated with this already. So while we are trying to do a good thing, the question is why we are ignoring established formal procedures that exist to be able to give a Minister this type of power that could be opened to abuse, one, depending on who the Minister is. Two, a Minister—even as my friend from Oropouche West is it? As qualified as he is and I am not doubting his qualification, but the question is real. That Minister may not be the Minister that will be there all the time, and a Minister is not necessarily a subject matter expert even on this side right now. They are not everybody that is a Minister in a particular area has that particular expertise. And, therefore, the question of making legislation to suit one person is extremely relevant.

**Hon. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, Standing Order 54(1)(b) please.

**Hon. Member:** That is not tedious repetition.

**Hon. Padarath:** Sorry 55(1)(b). The former speaker on the Opposition side has repeatedly dealt with this issue.

**Mr. Speaker:** I have looked at the Standing Order, at this point it is borderline but I do not consider it to be irrelevant or tedious repetition but as I have said it is borderline so perhaps we could move on a bit, shall we?

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, I move on. And I just want to touch on some of the established procedures for reconsidering denied approvals and applications.

So, for example, we have the Ministry of the People, Social Development and Family Services, where a written appeal is supplied and it is relooked by the board. They might have a hearing, they may introduce more information in the hearing. If we look at what happens at the Accreditation Council there is an independent committee that reviews the denial and therefore is able to come to some level of consideration. If you look at what happens at Town and Country Planning, there is an advisory town planning panel, again, a body that deals with denied applications and can reconsider it with the appropriate qualifications. And if we look at the National Insurance Board there is also a tribunal, a National Insurance Appeals Tribunal that deals denied applications. Even in this case where the Town and Country Planning application is denied, the final decision is up to the Minister but it is after consideration by the panel.

So, the point is that there are other ways existing in the public service right now to deal with matters of denied application. And what is being introduced in this legislation is a departure from those types of proceedings where you have qualified personnel relooking a particular situation. So, the question is, why is it so different? Why do we need to go into giving a Minister such sweeping powers when there are alternative ways that have been tried and tested? And the question of whether the time sensitivity is important, that is important. And that can certainly be built in as it is in some of these that are open for examination when time limits are put in, to ensure that matters do not drag on because it is about life, it is about children, and it is about saving lives. So, that is a consideration that can be introduced into the legislation.

So, Mr. Speaker, the question really is whether it is necessary for the Minister to have that type of power even as we the PNM support the expansion of the services offered not just life threatening but life altering or life limiting conditions. We support that. However, we are concerned about the powers of the Minister and we are concerned because there are other established mechanisms that can be used, and we would like to understand why those have been bypassed, and why this particular method of dealing with it, has been introduced into legislation. Because it now sets a precedent and other bits of legislation may now be brought into the Parliament giving Ministers sweeping powers that we know when just a couple months ago that was an objection and there is a reason why—

**Hon. Hosein:** Mr. Speaker, I rise on 55(1)(b), I think my colleague has now crossed the borderline.

**Mr. Speaker:** Well, I have looked at it, I think in all fairness she is pointing to alternative statutory formulations. I think the lawyers in here would answer it but I think the Member has made her point and we could move on from it. The overarching principles I see it, it is an alternative statutory formulation, you all will have the chance to answer it. But I think we could move on, I think the point has been made. There is the principle of a statutory formulation so we could move on. But we do not need to compare apples to apples and oranges to oranges so we could move on.

**Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, certainly. I do not want to delay this House any further and I have made the point. And exactly what the contribution is supposed to make so that we do not want in trying to do a good thing to introduce something that may cause us difficulty in latter times. We do not make law for one person, we make law for the running of our country. And so I want to reiterate that the question of the sweeping powers of the Minister, those

concerns can be handled using established procedures and that would be in much better form in terms of legislation for Trinidad and Tobago. Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for the opportunity.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** I call on the hon. Prime Minister.

**The Prime Minister (Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC):** Thank you, thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, this has been a most interesting debate and I did not want to let it go past without contributing to this debate because where we are today, as its genesis from way back in 2010 as I believe my colleagues would have spoken on. I congratulate my colleagues who would have spoken on this side, I thank them for their contributions, the Minister of Health and the Member for Couva North.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So, the hon. Member for—she left?

**Hon. Members:** St. Ann's East. She ran, she ran away.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** —St. Ann's East made some really surprising statements, well in some ways absurd but totally not true. The Member said—

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Member for St. Ann's East, "the PNM always protects children."

**Hon. Members:** Woah!

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** "The PNM always protects children", I said really, really, and then uses a Senator pointing when a Bill was being debated, the Child Marriage Bill, that Senator gave views that were their views, but at the end of the day let us record it here, as it was recorded before, the UNC totally supported that Bill which had to do with avoiding and making sure that we did not

have child marriages.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We supported the Bill. So, if one Senator expresses views, it happens on their side, on any side. But at the end of the day our party, the great party to which I belong, and we belong, we supported the Child Marriage Bill to prevent child marriages. But then what about the Justice Barnes Report, what about the Justice Jones reports?

**Hon. Members:** Oh!

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** All these had to do with children. What did they do when they were there? So, the Member for St. Ann's East, I cannot say it is lying, not parliamentary, but it is not speaking the truth when mentioning that they took care of children, they always protect the children. They have not done that and I will show you why. We are in Parliament today and just by chance I said to God, "the Lord does not sleep you know, the Lord only wears pajamas." And today of all days there is a report that came to the Parliament Laid as Paper No. 7 on the Order Paper:

"The Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the Children's Life Fund for year ended September 30, 2015."

Laid on this Order Paper today by the hon. Minister of Finance.

The Report of the Auditor General on our financial statements of the Children's Life Fund for the year ended September 30 2015. Before I take some extracts out of that report, let me first make note of it. This is a report for the year ended when? September 2015, 2015 that is the last year that we on this side were in government. Ten years later not a single report has been filed. A report has to be filed according to law every year, annual report. Your last report from that side

is my report, our report, for 2015 and for the last 10 years, not one. But you care about children.

**Hon. Members:** Hmm.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You care so much about children what would those reports have said? Let me tell you what the 2015 report says, because Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West quoting all kinds of articles that appeared to be negative but we can deal with those. But the good things he will not talk about. So the 2015 report, under my watch, only now being laid, tells us this. First of all it tells us that:

“The management of the Children Life Fund is responsible for the preparation and fair presentation of...Financial Statements in accordance with International Financial Reporting Standards, and for...internal control as management determines is necessary to enable...preparation of Financial Statements that are free from material misstatement, whether due to fraud error.”

Earlier I quoted from the Auditor General's Report on the Public Accounts of Trinidad and Tobago and the rest of that is history because that was filled with all kinds of fiscal—

**Hon. Members:** Mischief.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—shenanigans and mischief and fiscal non-accountability. On the other hand, this report about the 2015 Children's Life Funds administering of the money tells us in my view, audit evidence obtained is sufficient, it is sufficient. So we get a clean bill of health apart from—

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—a grand payable balance of \$483.79 was not verified. This amount was subsequently written off in the 2018 financial

statements. So for this one, 2015, here we are, clean bill of health for the Children's Life Fund, so, I move along. For 10 years you could not file one report about the Children's Life Fund but that is not bad enough. In your time, during your time, there was a joint select committee of the Parliament about what? Children's Life Fund. An enquiry into the administration of the Children's Life Fund authority and this is what came out of that recommendations. Talking about amendments to the 2010 Act, this is what—you were in government. Who were the Members? I will tell you who they were, of that joint select committee, our side and your side.

**7.20 p.m.**

Who were the members? I will tell you who they were, of that Joint Select Committee; our side and your side. They were Dr. Varma Deyalsingh, Independent; Mr. Esmond Forde, MP; Lisa Morris-Julian, MP; Ayanna Webster-Roy, MP; Nigel de Freitas, MP; Renuka Sagramsingh-Sooklal; not one of whom is either in this House or in the other House today. There were two others representing the Opposition. They were MP Khadijah Ameen and Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial. This was the composition of this team. As I say, the only remaining Members of the Parliament are the two UNC members. Every other single PNM one has gone.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And in this report, a recommendation was made, and this is in 2021. We are now in, well, '25, but just exiting office are our colleagues from the other side. This is what it says, Summary of recommendations, at page 10.

“iv The CLF should develop a draft proposal to amend Act No. 12 of 2010 to accommodate a wider range of children in need of medical

treatment.”

Care about children; 2021 did nothing. It took us today, in this amendment Bill, to increase, to widen, the net of children who will now qualify for help under the Children's Life Fund.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And also talked about considering a provision for proving medical costs that exceed the TT \$1 million limit on a case-by-case basis. This is 2021, since 2021. In 2025, it took this Government to come today in our amendment Bill to do exactly that. Where the cost exceeds the \$1 million, worked on a case-by-case basis, that is one of the amendments before this House today. So we have used the word “hypocrisy” all evening in several contexts, and we have used the word “context” in several contexts as well. We talked about it, hypocrisy. So when the Member from St. Ann's East tells us about caring for the children, you had this since 2021, and it took this UNC Government to come today to make it happen. My colleagues have already spoken.

**Mr. Tancoo:** In five weeks.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you for reminding me, in five weeks. A promise made, a promise delivered today.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So, I am saying I will not be very long because my colleagues have done so well, but there are a few points I would like to make. It is recorded history that our first Bill in 2010 was a Children's Life Fund Bill, and likewise again our first Bill in 2025.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I am not sure if people remember that every Member of my Government contributed personal moneys to the Children's Life

Fund, every single one of us. I contributed 10 per cent of my salary to the Children's Life Fund, and every Member of my Parliament, on our side, contributed 5 per cent of their salary to the fund. This gave the Fund, the establishment of this fund, for me and our team, one of our greatest accomplishments because we were saving lives. I do not think the other side ever put 5 cents into that fund. I think they have abolished the 1 cent, so they did not even put a 5 cent into this account. This fund was established, as we know, to give relief to those children suffering from life-threatening diseases, life-threatening.

If we look at the amendment today, the extra additional amendment, life-threatening diseases, but we have now added what we are calling life-limiting diseases in Schedule 3, and it is now 28 diseases. Children suffering from these are now going to be given help under this Life Fund. Caring about children? This is about caring about children, 28.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You may ask me why. Why are we increasing the net? Why do we want to give other children access to this Life Fund? Yes, life-threatening diseases, you know, if you do not get the help, you are surely not going to survive. Life-limiting diseases affect your quality of life and that of your entire family, but those two could ultimately end up in death. So when initially we had crafted this Bill together in 2010, we had put it to life-threatening diseases, and again, that is what time does with us. We learn from experiences and that is why we see the benefit.

We even have the benefit of the JSC recommendations to expand on it. So we recognized, we understood the pain of parents, children, and families, when they face the reality that they will lose their child simply because they could not afford the treatment that was needed. As a Government, we did not consider this

as a favour to families. This is not a handout. We did not see it like that. We still do not see it like that. As a Government, and as Prime Minister, we considered that it was our solemn duty to do everything to save the lives of our children. I can tell you something I have repeated, it is often quoted. In serving the best interest of our children, we serve the best interest of humanity. In serving the best interest of our children, we serve the best interest of humanity, and that is what we are doing by helping more and more.

There are those who will not understand, cannot understand, or refuse to understand the kind of suffering, because they may never have to go through that kind of experience. There are those on the other side holding power for almost 50 years and not one of them had the humanity, the caring, the compassion to look after the children of those from the most vulnerable homes. Families throughout the length and breadth of our country, everybody suffered, but they also benefitted from the Children's Life Fund.

We saved many lives, 2010 to 2015. It was a very fulfilling experience for all of us. And if you could see, Mr. Speaker, some of the letters we have received. MP Padarath spoke of the letters and cards. Sometimes I go somewhere to a function and a child who is now an adult will run up and grab me and say, "You know, I was one of the children." It brings tears to my eyes. I was one of the children who benefitted from that fund, now an adult, now contributing to the development of our nation. So we always know the nice song, "I believe the children are our future." We treat them well, we save them and we do the best that we can.

So that legislation that was passed to govern the Fund was meant to be administered in a manner that put the lives of children first. It was meant to be interpreted generously. It was meant to be interpreted, and this is a very important

point, generously, not strictly. The lawyers will understand, but ordinary people will too, that you go within the spirit of the law in interpreting it and not within the letter of the law. But too much, too much, the administrators went within the letter of the law and denied children who should have benefited from benefiting. The intention was very clear. It was about saving lives, to give priority to those who needed to be saved.

While there was any doubt in the administration of the fund, the best interest of the child ought to have been guided by the exercises and discretion of the decisions taken. Not, as I say, within the letter of the law, but with a generous purposive intention, my AG would tell me, but within the spirit of the law. The fund was meant to save lives. As Prime Minister, I say without apology that persons that suffered the most for the last nine years under the Government, they were all children of our country. That is why they were removed from Government, the other side, and that gives us a leeway now to help so many others.

I want to share with you the pain and suffering. I think we need to hear it from the persons who were affected, which will help explain why we are doing what we are doing today, why we are going further, why we are widening the catchment, the net of those who will benefit. I want to share this, hon. Speaker, the pain and suffering that was inflicted.

The Member for Port of Spain North quoted some article, but he did not quote an article from the *Express*, March 02, 2016.

“Baby Miracle’s six-week fight for life ended at 3.13 a.m. yesterday”.

I am quoting here with your leave, Sir.

“Five hours later, the Children’s Life Fund told her parents that funding for their daughter’s surgery had been approved.”

Five hours after the child had already died. Again in that same *Express*, March 02,

2016:

“The baby’s father, Kerwin Cross, believes that had there been a shorter waiting period, Miracle would have been alive today.”

He said

“‘She waited as long as she could...She would have gotten through if the system was faster and if it was more efficient...She couldn’t wait so long...It’s so sad.’ Cross told the Express. He plans to be a voice for parents facing similar situations.”

That is why in this Bill, this amended Bill, we have put some of those provisions to avoid that kind of tragedy from recurring for any family.

Cross went on to say:

“‘I want to help others...This is the worst thing I ever felt...I will try my best to have a voice for other people. No parent should have to wait patiently for something so critical. No parents should have to go through this, no matter their position in society. I will somehow try to speed up the system.’

Cross said his hurt was compounded when he was contacted by the Children’s Life Fund yesterday morning. He said a hospital official told him that funds for such complicated surgeries are usually approved in a maximum period of two weeks.”

In a maximum period of two weeks.

“‘The surgery was so complex, it took too long for the Life Fund to respond...I was angry and hurting. I didn’t expect the ending to be anywhere close to this. I could not talk...It took me a while to accept she was gone.’ Baby Miracle was born January 18 and scans showed she had congenital cyanotic heart disease, along with transposition of great vessels.

Cross had described her condition as one where the arteries were on the opposite side of baby Miracle's heart and unoxygenated blood was being pumped and making her turn blue. He said doctors told him it was the first time they had seen a heart in such a condition in our country. Miracle's surgeries were expected to cost about US \$200,000. Last moments before approval was given by the CLF, Cross was told that should the board give the all clear, Miracle would have left Trinidad by next week. She would have undergone surgery—in a children's hospital in—“Jacksonville, Florida...When contacted by Express last week, a Children's Life Fund official said that Miracle...Cross's case was receiving ‘urgent attention’ and her condition was being discussed.” And again—“Around midnight on Wednesday Cross and wife were contacted by the San Fernando Hospital after Miracle began having difficulty breathing. He said they were told not to be alarmed but then her vital signs had worsened.”

But do not be alarmed.

“Cross said he held his daughter for the last time and the first time as her body became weaker.” Her signs dropped and they were “told that she was no longer breathing on her own. Miracle died while being held by both her parents.” Cross said, “‘I had to tell my sons their sister was not coming home.’ The Crosses have two” other “boys...The elder boy tried comforting his...parents.”

All of this has been reported, and I am sharing this. You say it is too long, but this is why. And others that we are making the amendments that we are seeking to change so that children like Miracle and others can benefit and their families can benefit.

“Cross, 35, a barber and pastor and his wife Crystal who is studying for a

bachelor's degree in human resource and accounting, expressed gratitude to all the doctors who" helped them. "They also said thank you to all who supported their daughter"

So I do not understand this. So, when we pass this legislation today, we do so in the hope that never again will there be another child to suffer the fate of Baby Miracle. That is the legacy of the PNM who cares about children. This is a record of how they treated children.

There is another case of Sean Luke and Terrence Chandu. Mr. Speaker, I want to tell you this afternoon the story of two other children. Their experiences with the Children's Life Fund as administered under the PNM. I will call them Sean and Terrence. Sean was born April 11, 2013. TC was born 30<sup>th</sup> June, 2012. When Sean was nine months old, he was diagnosed with beta thalassemia major. When TC was eight months old, he was also diagnosed. The only cure for this blood disorder is a cell transfusion not available in Trinidad and Tobago. Both children relied monthly for blood transfusion along with daily iron therapy to stay alive. Parents made arrangements to pursue a cell transfusion for their children. It is the only curative treatment for this disease and the only way to save lives.

They identified a Bambino Paediatric Hospital in Rome, Italy, as a centre for a bone marrow transplant. The cost of the surgery is approximately €150,000. This did not include related expenses associated with the surgery and aftercare.

**7.35 p.m.**

By a letter dated 04 April, 2017, the parents made an application to the fund under provisions of the Act for the children to cover the expenses of the operation and associated expenses. By a letter dated 06 April, 2017—that same year—the parents made an application to the fund under provisions of the Act on behalf of TC to access funding to cover expenses. Both applications satisfied all the criteria

set out in section 19 of the Act, to qualify for the funding.

However, Mr. Speaker, it does not end there. Letter now dated 6<sup>th</sup> of April, same year, the Minister of Health was informed of the application made on behalf of SL by the parents. Moving on to 7<sup>th</sup> of April, the letter written to the Minister was forwarded to the chairman of the board of CLF. By a letter dated 10<sup>th</sup> of April—so this is almost daily letters going backward and forth—2017, the chairman of the board wrote to the attorney-at-law for the parents saying:

The board had considered the application, and they were legally precluded from approving same.

Legally precluded from given approval.

By letter dated 13<sup>th</sup> of April, the Chairman of the board of the fund wrote to the parents telling them that the application made on the children's behalf was rejected. The reasons given by the Chairman for rejecting are as follows: The assessment by the life unit of the authority advised that the medical condition was not life-threatening as required by section 19(e) of the Act. The documents submitted by the parents from the paediatric hospital in Italy indicated that the children were admitted in a hospital on May 02, 2017. Total cost will be €158,000. The family has already paid this amount in full, and your letter also confirms this information.

However, the Act does not allow for reimbursement but rather, it provides a detailed upfront application assessment and approval process at sections 18 and 21 because of the legal criteria. The clinical assessment in the life unit of the authority has advised that the medical condition of a child is not life-threatening; not life-threatening. Documents submitted by the parents indicate that the medical bill for the patient has been paid in full. The board does not approve reimbursements, and as I say again, you have the pay up front. Can you imagine a

farmer, a carpenter, a nurse, a teacher, or an unemployed person having to face that condition in their home with no one to help them?

The child was diagnosed at nine months old and had the first transfusion, January 2014. They mortgaged their home—the family—to cover the cost of this surgery. However, after the property was valued, they said, “It was not enough to raise the money.” They had a mortgage, they had to borrow, the family had a barbecue fundraiser. They also had a calypso show, a boat cruise, and they still could not raise the money. The parents took no-pay leave from jobs to look after the children. And the other child, the story continues in the same way. It is with children like these and so many others, I said 28 diseases that are life-limiting, that we have brought the amendments to this Bill. This is what a child had to go through.

The doctors, you know, showed no remorse, little saying that they would get used to whatever is the condition. Their parents had to wait up to five hours at times at the transfusion, waiting for it to be done. Being a toddler at a time, one of the children would continually try to take out the access from the transfusion line. As a parent, I ask you to imagine that.

They were able to pay for the surgery, but these are not stories that are taken from a newspaper article, Mr. Speaker. I have intimate knowledge of these two children, SL and TC, and I will tell you why. Because in 2017, together with other lawyers, I commenced public law litigation in the courts of Trinidad and Tobago for these two children on their behalf.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Attorney-at-law, Gerald Ramdeen, was one of those lawyers on my team. We took the matter to court, challenging the decision of the Children's Life Fund refusing funding for these children for their life-

limiting diseases. Minister Sturge, who sits with us today; Minister Sturge, yes, can we give him—*[Inaudible]*

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Minister Sturge volunteered himself as a public interest litigant on behalf of the children. As I said, we led that team of lawyers, represented the children, to challenge the decision of the life fund authorities to refuse them funding. You know what was the response of the PNM, who cares so much about children? When we filed the case, we did it through letters, and letters, back and forward, trying to save the children, and then as I said, through litigant, public litigant, interest litigant, now MP Sturge. We filed the matter in court and the response was, the former Attorney General, Reginald Armour, was hired to defend the refusal to fund the treatment of these children.

**Hon. Member:** Wow! Shameful.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The PNM was prepared to refuse a child life-saving treatment but instead, preferred wanting to line the pockets of their friends, their financiers, the “eat-ah-food” lawyers in this country. That is not malice, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Padarath:** That is truth.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That is truth, but it is also evil.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** They chose their friends, they chose to choose their friends to brief. Mr. Armour, who later became the Attorney General, they chose them. Today, we choose our children.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** My Government, we choose the children. We commit today to, again, to put our children first. Mr. Speaker, you know what is

really shocking? They were in government for nine years, they witnessed the lives of our children being lost to life-threatening diseases, and not a single attempt was made by them in that nine years to amend this legislation to bring more children into receiving funds to save their lives; not one attempt. And then has the gall to stand here today to tell this Parliament and the nation that the PNM cares about children.

**Ms. John:** To keep the children's hospital closed for 10 years.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** To keep the children—and then that Couva Children's Hospital, state-of-the-art, closed down, shut down; shut down for 10 years, whilst 19 babies died and NICU in Port of Spain, but you care about children?

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Not one attempt. I do not know what it is, I do not know what it is, but it could be because they just do not care. They have no heart or love for the children of our country.

**Mr. Speaker:** Excuse me—

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Children's Life Fund—yes, Sir?

**Mr. Speaker:** You have one more minute.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Of full time, or original time?

**Mr. Speaker:** No, original time.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Can I just avail myself a few more minutes of extra time?

**Mr. Speaker:** You may. You may.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you so much. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So, not one attempt. The Children Life's Fund intended—well, it was initially established to eliminate suffering as much we could for children. It was

transformed by the PNM into an institution responsible for the suffering of the children. These examples I have given to you are not isolated incidents. They frequently occurred after 2015, because those who were given the opportunity, charged with administering the fund, they simply did not care. Today, we cannot bring back those children who died. We cannot bring them back. They may be in a better place with the good Lord. We cannot bring them back. But you know what we can do? We can promise to do all we can to never allow another child to suffer the loss of their life, wanting life-saving medical treatment.

Today, I want to dedicate these amendments to all the children, all those parents who, unfortunately, lost their lives waiting on the Children's Life Fund. We must make a promise today to do all that we can; all that we can to—never again must we allow this to happen. Mr. Speaker, I thank you for your time.

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

### **PROCEDURAL MOTION**

**The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath):** Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 15(5), I beg to move that the House continue to sit until the conclusion of the business before it.

*Question put and agreed to.*

### **CHILDREN'S LIFE FUND (AMDT.) BILL, 2025**

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Caroni East.

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

**Hon. Dr. Rishad Secheran:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for allowing me to speak here today. To start, I would like to congratulate you on your appointment as Speaker of the House. As well, Mr. Speaker, I will like to congratulate all my colleagues on this side for their flawless victory in the General Elections, 2025.

**UNREVISED**

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

**Hon. Dr. R. Seecheran:** Mr. Speaker, this was done under the leadership and the inspiration of now two-time Prime Minister, the Member for Siparia, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar.

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

**Hon. Dr. R. Seecheran:** So, Mr. Speaker, we now have the mandate, and citizens have demanded change and we give the assurance that we will serve with dignity, we will serve with integrity, and we will serve with pride for all citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Speaker, it will be remiss of me if I were not to thank the constituents of Caroni East for electing me for another five years as their representative, and I give them the commitment that their future and their children's future are in safe and caring hands.

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

**Hon. Dr. R. Seecheran:** Mr. Speaker, I will also like to thank the Minister of Health for his outstanding contribution in piloting this the first Bill of this new parliamentary term. I would also like to thank the stellar contribution by the Minister of Public Utilities and the Leader of Government Business for his contribution, as well as, of course, the Prime Minister for her always caring attitude to the children of our country.

I will not take up all my time today, but I will just like to address a few issues that were raised by those on the other side. The Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, one of his objections to this legislation was that there would not be proper oversight. Today, Mr. Speaker, we saw the Minister of Finance having to file on the Floor of this House the annual statement of 2025. So, I would like to ask the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West, where are the

annual returns for 2015 to today?—as well as many of the issues that he raised were addressed in the Joint Select Committee in 2023.

I would also like to raise the idea that the term “life limiting” is a concept which the Member stated, and I will like him to know that it is actually a medical term. The Member also went on to say that we are conferring a superpower upon the Minister of Health, but if one were to read the amendments that we have put forward here today, it is qualified, and it is qualified by being of public interest as well as urgent need or in exceptional circumstances. So that cannot be as broad as the Member was suggesting, and as well as, obviously, the Minister will avail himself or herself to technical advice.

The Member went on to say, what situation could this possibly be with regard to, and the Prime Minister, the Minister of Health, as well as the Minister of Public Utilities, they highlighted many, many patients in which this pertained. And I would like to make mention of Triston Ramlochan, a 14-year-old who, in 2022, died because he was awaiting treatment abroad.

### **7.50 p.m.**

Another issue I would like to object to as well was the Member for St. Ann's East, and she also stated that the PNM has always stood in the defence of children. But if you were to look at an article dated the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May, 2025, in the *Trinidad Guardian*, the Leader of the Opposition now had said:

“...People now feel that the PNM doesn't care”

And if I were to quote what she said, she said:

““...I have found in the public domain...people””—are—“feeling that the party has not been sufficiently caring—that the party is not knowledgeable about...issues...”

Having said that, while we were debating these amendments, the mother of one

child that actually received funds for treatment, the mother being Rena Siew, saw the debate going on and she reached out to one of the Members on this Floor and stated that her child benefitted and is now 10 years old, and this 10-year-old child has written a letter to the Prime Minister. And in this letter, I would like to put this on the *Hansard*, she had said:

My name is Ashreen Siew, I am 11 years old and I live in Balmain Village, Couva. I am writing this letter to express my sincere gratitude to you—and this is to the Prime Minister—for assistance from the Children's Life Fund in the year 2014.

In 2013, I was born at the Mount Hope maternity hospital with a life-threatening heart condition called Tetralogy of Fallot, which included four major heart defects that required emergency surgery. If I did not get this surgery before one year of my birth, I would not have been able to survive.

At that time, my parents were not able to afford medical expenses that were needed for my surgery, but thanks to the assistance of the Children's Life Fund, I was able to travel abroad and get medical assistance and surgery, which will now allow me to live a normal and happy life.

I do hope the Children's Life Fund remains up and running and is able to help a lot of children that are in my situation.

I thank you, again, Madam Prime Minister.

Yours respectfully,

Ashreen Siew.

So these are the issues that we currently face and the need, the public need for this legislation.

As I said, I will not take my entire time because we have a lot more business here to conduct tonight, but the reason why we are here today is because of a

judicial judgment, a High Court judgment in which a judicial review claim was made regarding the interpretation of the current law. And we here, in the House of Representatives, as the highest court in this land, will amend this legislation in the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

I would just like to close and say that I support all the amendments that are proffered here today, and I am in support of the Prime Minister, as well as the Minister of Health in these amendments. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** I call on the Minister and Member for Oropouche West.

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

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Dr. Lackram Bodoë):** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, there remains very little to be said after the Prime Minister has spoken. I want to thank my colleagues, the Member for Couva South and the Member for Caroni East, for their contributions. And just to address briefly, I am happy that those speakers on the other side are in full support of the Bill. The Member for St. Ann's East indicated that we were forced to bring amendments—that the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West forced us to bring amendments. This is certainly not true. We came to this House well prepared with those amendments.

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

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:** Mr. Speaker, I understand what it is to be in Opposition, you have to say something, Member, but I mean, that is okay.

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

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:** And I just wanted to clarify the point made by the Member for St. Ann's East that there are alternative options to look at denied applications. And just to say that in this case, time is of the essence, as I am sure you

understand, Member, and of course, children will die because of bureaucracy, literally. So I will leave that to rest.

The Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West seemed to be concerned, as did the Member for St. Ann's East, about the powers being allocated to the Minister. I think my colleague from Couva South addressed that adequately and appropriately. And just to say that, you know, there is also the presumption in law that public functionaries will exercise their powers reasonably and certainly, I want to give the assurance to this House, to the Members on the other side and to the public that I do not intend to advise myself at all. And, of course, there is technical advice when I am called upon, or when the Minister is called upon to make decisions. I think that goes without saying. I think that point was made before.

There was the issue of fraud, and just to say that that matter is still before the High Court. No one has been convicted, so it is an ongoing matter. But just to clarify that since that time, cash is no longer handled at the Authority. All transactions are facilitated by our bankers. There is tighter financial control. All payments are made directly to hospitals and the relevant service providers, and letters for authorization for payment requires two approved signatories. And the Authority also has a financial investment manager. So I think that should put to rest the concern that there might be fraud.

With regard to the allegation that hospitals may be chosen arbitrarily, that is certainly not the case. I am informed that there is a hospital approval policy that is used to approve the hospitals, utilized by this Children's Life Fund Authority. It outlines all the criteria that must be met and steps to be undertaken. The Authority also has a clinical subcommittee of the board, a management that reviews all mortalities. So in terms of that, I think there is no need for the public to be worried

about that.

In fact, one of the hospitals mentioned here, through all the hospitals that are used, is the Wolfson Children's Hospital, which I have had the opportunity to visit myself sometime. And that is a state-of-the-art institution—I can share with this House—in Jacksonville, especially for treating very high-risk cases and so on. I believe that is all that I have to answer here, Mr. Speaker.

So, Mr. Speaker, I just want to close by saying that, you know, the people of Trinidad and Tobago put us here because they trust us and you know, to say that the Member for Siparia and the Prime Minister has delivered what she promised in the campaign, and I beg to move.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Minister, might I ask—crave your indulgence to determine whether you intend to exercise your right under Standing Order 68(1).

**Hon L. Dr. Bodoë:** Yes. Thank you.

**Mr. Speaker:** I am ably reminded by my able—that perhaps you might wish to beg to move the Bill.

**Hon. Dr. L. Bodoë:** I am sorry. I did say, I beg to move, but I am very happy and proud to say, I beg to move again, Mr. Speaker.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a second time.*

*Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.*

*House in committee.*

*Clauses 1 and 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 3.*

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Mr. Chairman—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Chairman:** Member for Port of Spain South.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** I will wait until you put your question, Mr. Chairman.

*Question proposed:* That clause 3 stand part of the Bill.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** I do have an issue with clause 3, as it is drafted, Mr. Chairman. If the purpose is to expand the definition and make “life limiting” the substitute for “life-threatening”, it is my respectful view that life-threatening does not necessarily have to mean life limiting, it should just mean quality of life. And maybe they ought to consider not deleting or not omitting “life-threatening”, but adding “life limiting and life-threatening”, which covers a broader interpretation and gives the courts, and gives the arbiter, whoever decides, a broader discretion as opposed to life limiting, because it is not every life-threatening condition that may be life limiting.

**8.05 p.m.**

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** That is the next clause down. New clause 2A.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** My understanding is that they are looking to replace “life-threatening” with “life limiting”. So you are taking out “life-threatening” completely. My suggestion is that not every life-threatening illness relates to death. And if the purpose of the Bill as I understand the recital at the start of the Bill is to expand the categories, then maybe you ought to consider “life-threatening” and “life limiting” and not limited to “life limiting”.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** So the exact words used in the clause require that you read “life limiting” by reference to the illnesses listed in Schedule 3, and of course there is a (b). If you look at Schedule 3, what you would see is that those are life limiting—

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Twenty eight.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** Twenty eight diseases, but they are not necessarily life-threatening.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** So my point is—because if you look at clause5—just going on down—they are deleting—there is no longer any Schedule 3 from the original Bill. You have completely eliminated and deleted Schedule 3 in clause3 of the Bill.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** Schedule 3 is now going in. It is new.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Not in the amendment that I received, hon Attorney General. The amendment as clause4, as I have received, says—

**Mr. Young SC:** No, no, no. It is Clause3—*[Inaudible]*

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Clause 3, yeah.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** This is a new Schedule. It is proposed that this Schedule will form part of Bill. It is in red ink here.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** But the amendment that was circulated to us does not include that, hon. Attorney General.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** I see.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** All it has is:

...facilitate the provision of specialist medical treatment to children suffering from life limiting illnesses.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** Okay. So the version that I have does have it.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Mr. Chairman, we did not get it.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** I am sorry. We will consider it and we will attempt to make the changes that you have so helpfully suggested.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** Perhaps—I am told that your practice is that you put these things in writing, but we are pressing on. Thanks.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Mr. Chairman, I have just received it.

**Mr. Young SC:** We put it in writing—*[Inaudible]*—the amendments.

**Members:** *[Crosstalk]*

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Hon. Member for Siparia, I am not hearing you. Sorry.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I am so sorry. I am saying the hon. Attorney General has given an undertaking. He would consider your concern—

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** With a smile.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—and if it is necessary we will change it.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** Thank you.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** I am grateful.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We will consider it. Thank you.

**Mr. Chairman:** Members, can I invite the hon. Attorney General to address the amendments proposed to clause 3 that were distributed today and then perhaps you can go on to other—It might, I suspect, that discussion might clarify what you were advocating for, Member for Port of Spain South. Where are we now?

**Member:** Clause 3. Your new amendment.

**Mr. Chairman:** Can I read it out? Clause 3 provides that the side note:

Section 4 is amended.

3. Section 4(2) of the Act is amended by repealing paragraph (b) and substituting the following paragraph:

“(b) facilitate the provision of specialist medical treatment to children suffering for life limiting illnesses.”

In the original Act, it comes under “functions of the Authority”. It amends (b); the first four lines and one word of (b). It strikes and it replaces those with:

facilitate the provision of specialist medical treatment to children suffering from life limiting illnesses.

So that is the policy of the Act; to extend coverage. You need not show “life-threatening”.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Mr. Chairman, my suggestion is that because the *raison d'être*

of the amendment is to expand the categories of persons, it may be sagacious to consider just not leaving it to “life limiting” because not every life-threatening condition could be life limiting and therefore, to include “life-threatening” and “life limiting”. So you lose nothing and you gain something. You gain the expansiveness that the amendment proposes to create.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Member, if you have a life-threatening disease, would not it be caught into life limiting?

**Mr. Scotland SC:** No, because not every life-threatening—

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** This is the advice that we are receiving. This is what I said early. We will consider your suggestion and look at the advice we are getting from the technocrats—[*Inaudible*] You are saying life limiting. That includes life-threatening.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** In the interest of carrying us along, our advice is different. We cannot resolve that right now. This formulation captures, in our view, the policy of the Act but we will take a note and come back.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And we have the other place.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** I have put my position on it, but just in answer to the hon. Prime Minister, Member for Siparia, life-threatening has a sense of immediacy.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** Okay, thank you.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Life limiting does not.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We hear you. We note it.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Thanks man. Blessings.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you. We will take advice as we amend it.

**Mr. Chairman:** Question is that clause3 be amended as circulated.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 3, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 4 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clause 5.*

*Question proposed:* That clause 5 stand part of the Bill.

**Member:** Is it the same issue?

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Yes, limiting and threatening.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Mr. Chairman, it is the same issue that I raised in clause 3.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** Right. Ours is the same answer.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Mr. Chairman, on that point—because there is a new clause—may I say, because I have done in the brief time that I had on clause 3 and before you go to this clause, there is a marked distinction between life-threatening and life limiting. My research tells me that life limiting conditions like cystic fibrosis, and forms of muscular dystrophy or lung disease are life limiting. Life-threatening is like severe sepsis, heart attacks, and traumatic injuries. So there is a distinction. I reiterate my submission that if you are expanding, you ought not to limit it because this is the opportunity here but just add an “and” so include it. That is the point I make on 5 with examples.

**Mr. Jeremie SC:** Thanks for the examples. Thanks for the point. We will consider it. My answer is the same and we will come back to you.

**Mr. Chairman:** The question is that clause 5 be amended circulated.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Clause 5, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

*Clauses 6 and 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

**8.20 p.m.**

*New clause 2A.*

Section 3 Insert after clause 2, the following new clause:

amended 2A. Section 3 of the Act is amended by inserting

after the definition of “income”, the following definition:

““life limiting illness” means an illness-

(a) listed in Schedule 3; and

(b) the required treatment for which is unavailable at a local medical institution;”.”.

*New clause 2A read the first time.*

*Question proposed:* That new clause 2A be read a second time.

**Mr. Chairman:** Attorney General.

*[Attorney General confers with Technocrat]*

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** I am sorry. You want me to explain 2A? Okay. It introduces the definition of “life limiting illness”. I have spoken to that before.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar:** So “life limited illnesses”—

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** Schedule 3.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** *[Inaudible]* it was listed in Schedule 3 and the requirement to apply treatment is not available locally. There are two criteria for “life limiting illnesses.”

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Question proposed:* That new clause be added to the Bill.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*New clause 2A added to the Bill.*

*New clause 4A.*

Section 18 Insert after clause 4, the following new clause:

amended 4A. Section 18(2) of the Act is amended by repealing paragraph (c), and substituting the following

paragraph:

- “(c) the accredited health care institution capable of providing the relevant care and beneficial outcomes consistent with international best practices, whether that care is provided-
- (i) at a foreign institution; or
  - (ii) by foreign medical specialists from a foreign institution in a local private or public hospital, where it is feasible and more economically prudent to do so;”.

*New clause 4A read a first time.*

*Question proposed:* That new clause 4A be read a second time.

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. Chairman.

**Mr. Chairman:** Yes.

**Mr. Imbert:** Could I ask the Government to explain (ii) at the bottom there?

**Mr. Chairman:** I think we have to add it first Member and then we will—

*Question put.*

**Mr. Chairman:** Attorney General.

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Chairman:** You will get, after the AG. [*Confers with Clerk*] It does not stand part yet?

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** I am not hearing you.

**Mr. Imbert:** Procedurally, it appears that you are adding the clause without us having an opportunity to discuss the merits of the clause.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. Imbert:** We need to discuss the merits first and then add it. And I would like to discuss the merits of the clause please.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** Sure, I am prepared to discuss the merits.

**Mr. Imbert:** Well, I would hope so.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** Whatever.

**Mr. Imbert:** So the last part, that is (c)(ii), could you please explain what the effect of that is, what is the plan? You are bringing foreigners here to deal with these children, is that the plan?

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** Yes, it is. If it is feasible, to have the doctors come—if it is feasible and if it is cost effective, to have the doctors come instead of the children going.

**Mr. Imbert:** Okay, and the Minister would have the power to make that decision?

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** It is the fund that is making the decision.

**Mr. Imbert:** No, but when the Minister is using his overriding powers, would he be able to make the decision to bring foreign medical specialists here to deal with a sick child? Because you are giving the Minister an overriding power to make a grant in exceptional circumstances.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** The power to do this, is a power which is in the fund.

**Mr. Imbert:** So that it is the fund itself that will make the decision to bring the foreign medical specialist here, and then the Minister can decide whether to agree to that or not, is that what is going on?

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** I am not sure if that is part of it.

**Mr. Imbert:** You are sure you are not giving the Minister the power to do that?

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** The Minister's review is in respect of the grant power.

**Mr. Imbert:** Yes agree.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** The rejection of a grant.

**Mr. Imbert:** But somebody will make an application, and in that application, they may ask for a foreign medical specialist to come here to do the surgery and it appears the Minister may have the power to approve that application, if the authority does not approve it—if the fund does not approve. I just want clarification, that is all.

*[Attorney General confers with the Minister of Health]*

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** He says he would not have that power under this Act. The life unit of the fund is the only one that is going to be able to have the power to bring doctors in.

**Mr. Imbert:** Okay, if that is what you say. Alright.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Question proposed:* That new clause 4A be added to the Bill.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*New clause 4A added to the Bill.*

*New clause 5A.*

Section 21 Insert after clause 5, the following new clause:

amended 5A. Section 21 of the Act is amended by inserting after subsection (4), the following subsections:

“(5) Notwithstanding subsection (4), the Minister on the recommendation of the Board, may approve a grant not exceeding one million, five hundred thousand dollars in exceptional circumstances.

(6) The Minister by Order, subject to negative resolution of Parliament amend the quantum

as set out in subsections (4) and (5).”.”

*New clause 5A read a first time.*

*Question proposed:* That new clause 5A be read a second time.

*Question put.*

**Mr. Chairman:** Attorney General.

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, again, I would like to discuss the merits of this proposed amendment.

**Mr. Chairman:** Your time for that will come up shortly, Member.

**Mr. Imbert:** No problem, just taking in front.

**Mr. Chairman:** Just after the Attorney General explains this policy decision behind it. Attorney General.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** In the law as is now, (4) says that:

“No grant shall not exceed one million dollars.”

The amendment carries that up to 1.5. So the Minister has the power on the recommendation of the Board to make that increase in exceptional circumstances.

**Mr. Imbert:** I am glad for that clarification, but it is the last part of the proposed amendment. The Member for Siparia every single time I brought legislation to this House, complained about negative resolution. This is now negative resolution, and it is amending the quantum, and there is absolutely no limit on the amendment the Minister could make. May I ask in these circumstances that the Government would consider the Minister making a report to the Parliament on a quarterly basis, or something like that?

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** But Minister where you gave yourself these unbridled powers for negative resolution, they were for things that did not concern helping children.

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

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Exceptional circumstances and given the time constraints to [*Inaudible*] the power that should be given by themselves.

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, I did not hear a word the Member for Siparia said, because her Members drowned her out. So perhaps I was also not able to make myself clear. We are talking here about funding and you are allowing the Minister to increase the grant ad infinitum. It could be \$10 million could be \$20 million and it would be just by negative resolution. And since the Member for Siparia objected to this type of legislation every single time, I am wondering if the Government would wish to consider the Minister simply reporting to the Parliament on these grants. Because there was also in the Member's contribution earlier today, the point made that the Children's Life Fund had not reported for 10 years, and they did not have—

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** That is under your watch. You did not report for 10 years.

**Mr. Imbert:** That may be so, but what is good for the goose is good for the gander. So, if you are of the view that there should be transparency, I think this is a case for extreme transparency, because you are allowing the Minister to increase this thing to any amount. There is no limit whatsoever.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** There is a check and balance. That is the negative resolution of the Parliament and we are quite comfortable with that.

**Mr. Imbert:** So you are happy with that? A Minister could approve a grant of \$20 million.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We are going with negative resolution of Parliament, which is a check and balance over unbridled [*Inaudible*]

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

**Mr. Imbert:** So it was under our time—it was always so under our time.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Next clause.

**Mr. Imbert:** I see.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Question proposed: That new clause 5A be added to the Bill.*

*Question put and agreed to.*

*New clause 5A added to the Bill.*

*New clause 6A.*

Insert after clause 6, the following new clause:

“6A. The Act is amended by repealing Section 32 and the following section is substituted:

Minister may amend Schedules	32. (1) The Minister may, by Order subject to negative resolution of Parliament, amend Schedules 1 and 2 to this Act.
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(2) The Minister may, by Notification amend Schedule 3 to this Act.”.”.

*New clause 6A read a first time.*

*Question proposed: That new clause 6A be read a second time.*

**Mr. Chairman:** Attorney General.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** Okay, so 32(1) existed before I am told—the power to amend the Schedule by negative resolution.

*[Attorney General confers with Technocrat]*

So 32(2) is new to allow the Minister by notification to amend Schedule 3. One is subject to negative resolution—sorry, (1) and (2), subsection (1).

**Mr. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, I see the very thing the Member for Siparia complained about, ad infinitum, appears again here, and the Minister could just add any life limiting—

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I cannot hear you, Member.

**Mr. Imbert:** Sorry, I will speak up. The same thing that the Member for Siparia complained about, ad infinitum, appears here again. This is even worse. This is not by negative resolution. This is by notification, not subject to any parliamentary oversight of any kind. The Minister could just add any “life limiting illness” that he dreams up to this. Is this the policy of your Government to lack transparency? This is not negative resolution, not negative resolution.

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

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** There are matters in the Schedule which are technical in nature and the Minister has to have the power to make those changes. Thanks anyway.

**Mr. Imbert:** Attorney General, with due respect, adding an illness that in the mind of the Minister is life limiting is not technical.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** Okay.

**Mr. Imbert:** That is a decision the Minister would make. It is not a technical decision. It is a decision. It could be a political decision to add something because a case has arisen that the Minister wants to assist somebody who would not normally qualify, just added by notification. That is not transparency.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** Okay—

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Go ahead.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** Thanks for that, Member. I was not aware that your expertise vast as it is extended to medicine. I know it does more in construction and so on.

**Mr. Imbert:** Well, I was a Minister of Health, you forgot.

**Sen. Jeremie SC:** Thank you, thank you. Without being a doctor, it is a habit that you guys have. The point is that we really feel that we have come to an end here and——

**Mr. Imbert:** It is okay do what you want, no problem.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** [*Inaudible*] all the time, and every time, and what happened? You never listen to me, so now——

**Mr. Imbert:** And you complained about it, so you are now doing what you complained about.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** No, no, no in this circumstance, dealing with children these are for very different reasons, and we are sticking with this policy, we are sticking with it.

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

**8.35 p.m.**

**Mr. Imbert:** This is a fund, we are talking about money, taxpayers' money. Bang the table all you want, "tax doh go away".

**Mr. Chairman:** Okay. Members, I think the Minister of Health and the Minister in the Ministry of Health, either jointly or separately, would like to make an intervention.

**Dr. Bodoë:** Thank you, Chairman. Just to allay the fears of the Minister, and perhaps to clarify for the Member for Diego Martin North/East, this provision, if this has to go to negative resolution in keeping with the other powers of the Minister, it allows an urgent situation to be assessed, but it comes by way of notification. So it means that there is still some element of transparency involved.

**Mr. Imbert:** I am talking about parliamentary oversight. Where is the parliamentary oversight? There is none. It is just, "I published it somewhere", and that is it. That is the end of it. Debate on it, there is no opportunity to negative it.

**Mr. Young SC:** It does not even have to be published.

**Mr. Imbert:** Yeah, it does not even have to be published. That is true.

**Dr. Seecheran:** So, Member, in some situations a disease may appear in our population that may be extremely rare, one in a billion, or something like that, and we have not made a provision to list all known life-limiting diseases in the world, and should that condition appear, and it is a very urgent case with public interest, it gives the Minister the power to add that life-limiting condition and to move with urgency in that situation.

**Mr. Imbert:** Thank you very much for that explanation. Mr. Chairman, may I just respond to that? The time it would take to prepare an order for negative resolution and publish it in the *Gazette* is exactly the same time it would take to prepare a notification. There is no time difference. So why is this not by negative resolution so at least the public can see, the Parliament can see?

**Mr. Chairman:** Member for Barataria/San Juan.

**Mr. Hosein:** Mr. Chairman, thank you very much. Now, the Member for Diego Martin North/East always says that he does a lot of research, but if he just reads the parent law at section 30, there is four-month period at the end of the financial year where:

“...the Minister shall cause—

(a)—to have—“the audited financial statements...of the Children’s Life Fund...”—

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

**Mr. Hosein:** Hold on:

“...; and

(b) an annual report of the operations of the Authority including contributions made to the Children’s Life Fund, sums awarded and

the rate of success of medical treatment received by the beneficiaries of the Children's Life Fund, to be laid in Parliament.”

So there is parliamentary oversight, so I do not understand what the Member is complaining about.

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

**Mr. Imbert:** May I respond to that?

**Mr. Hosein:** Can I finish?

**Mr. Imbert:** Sure.

**Mr. Hosein:** The notification is going to be published widely in the *Gazette*, people will see it. You will see it.

**Mr. Imbert:** Oh, really?

**Mr. Hosein:** The annual reports have to be laid by law in the Parliament. You have failed to do it, you have failed to do it, but there is oversight over this, so I cannot understand your complaint.

**Mr. Imbert:** Well, I will explain. With negative resolution you have a time period to bring the matter to the Parliament. You have 40 days, and if you do not, that is the end of it. In the case of the reports, the Prime Minister made the point, that there were no reports for 10 years, and in your time there were no reports either.

**Mr. Young SC:** Additionally, Mr. Chair, what we are looking to do by this, is you are looking to add potential illnesses that could be covered, et cetera, by notification. So you are going to wait on an annual report to see what was added? And this notification does not say where the notification has to be. In law there is no principle called, “by notification in publication of x, y”. So this is giving the Minister full power and authority to just add anything, willy-nilly, and you are

saying, "Well, that will be caught by operations"; not necessarily so either.

**Mr. Chairman:** I think the point has been made. Ultimately, this is a question for policy and—

**Hon. Member:** And you are no longer the policy makers.

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

**Mr. Chairman:** So if we could move to the question.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Question proposed:* That the new clause be added to the Bill.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*New clause 6A added to the Bill.*

*Question put and agreed to:* That the Bill, as amended, be reported to the House.

*House resumed.*

**Mr. Speaker:** Minister of Health.

**The Minister of Health (Hon. Dr. Lackram Bodoie):** Mr. Speaker, I wish to report that the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill, 2025, was considered in the committee of the whole and approved with amendments. I now beg to move that the House agree with the committee's report.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill reported, with amendment, read the third time and passed.*

## **TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO REVENUE AUTHORITY**

### **(REPEAL) BILL, 2025**

**The Minister of Finance and the Minister in the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development (Hon. Davendranath Tancoo):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I beg to move:

That a Bill entitled an Act to repeal the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue

Authority Act, 2021 (Act No. 17 of 2021) be now read a second time.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Mr. Speaker, it is with sincere gratitude to Almighty God, the hon. Prime Minister, and the people of Fyzabad that I come before this honourable House today, for the first time as Minister of Finance, to pilot this significant Bill.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** It is with immense pride that as the Member of Parliament for Fyzabad, on the eve of Labour Day, that I stand here as a representative of the UNC Government, led by the distinguished Member for Siparia, to bury the vile Revenue Authority.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Mr. Speaker, on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April, 2025, the people of Trinidad and Tobago exercised their democratic right and made a decisive choice. They rejected the cronyism, nepotism, plutocracy, and the neglect—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—that had plagued this nation for the last nine years, seven months and two weeks, and instead placed their confidence in a new Government, one grounded in fairness, meritocracy and accountability.

Today, Mr. Speaker, in this Parliament we continue the fulfilment of our social contract with the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Mr. Speaker, just a few seconds ago we debated and passed the Children's Life Fund (Amdt.) Bill, 2025, a promise made by the hon. Prime Minister; a promise kept by her Government.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Now, Mr. Speaker, we turn to another promise made by our

Prime Minister, the repeal of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority, the TTRA, an institution which the previous Government, the previous administration sought to impose upon the country.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Diego Martin North/East.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Mr. Speaker, may I begin with why we oppose the TTRA. The PNM has consistently advocated for the establishment of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority as the ultimate solution to the longstanding challenges faced by the Board of Inland Revenue and the Customs and Excise Division.

We opposed the TTRA at every turn because it was deeply flawed at its core. Our stance was not obstinacy for its own sake. It was a very principled position, an objection to a model that threatened the very foundations of good governance in tax administration. From the outset, Mr. Speaker, the TTRA model breached constitutional and human rights, facilitated Executive overreach and opened the door to political interference in tax collection. It undermined the separation of power by eroding the independence of the Public Service Commission, the PSC, and attempted to outsource a core sovereign function, tax administration, to a semi-autonomous entity subjected to political control.

Mr. Speaker, we on this side believed then, as we do now, that tax administration is and must remain a sovereign responsibility insulated from partisan whims. For nine and a half long painful years, this country had to enjoy the oppressive, “bad mind”, evil, heartless, unpatriotic, anti-democratic, anti-people policies of the PNM, proudly promoted by every single one of them on the other side. Mr. Speaker, I stand here today as a proud Trinbagonian, proud that I am part of a Government that in just three clauses will reject the nine years of PNM hate, malice and “bad mind”.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Our country must never forget the glee on the Member for Diego Martin North/East, his face, when he raised taxes on the backs of our citizens over and over and over.

Every action taken by that Member was personal, every action, from his attack against the former Governor of the Central Bank to his more recent attack against the Auditor General of this country. But it was more than that, Mr. Speaker, in their desperate grab for power, they were willing to undermine the institutions established by our constitutional architects of our great nation to protect our democracy, our patrimony, our freedom. The saddest part about all of this, Mr. Speaker, is that the Member for Diego Martin North/East has not yet been held to account.

He has lost case after case, costing this country millions, and millions, and millions of dollars and never had to pay a cent from his pocket. He has never felt the pain that he has imposed upon the country, upon poor citizens of this country who had to pay for his misdeeds, Mr. Speaker. While all of that is despicable in itself, the worst example of this disregard for the population for our sacred institutions was this attack on the Board of Inland Revenue—this attack on the BIR.

**8.50 p.m.**

They broke up and undermined the BIR, just like Petrotrin, just so that they could claim that it was dysfunctional and shut it down. Mr. Speaker, the Board of Inland Revenue is of utmost importance to the functioning of our nation's tax system, and as such, public confidence in that system must never be compromised by ministerial interference or sabotage, or the result, Mr. Speaker, would be a loss of public confidence in the establishment and the operations of the BIR.

Mr. Speaker, we continue to lose money through transfer pricing, a matter

that the former Minister of Finance publicly committed to doing, but never did. That promise, like so many others by those on the opposite side, never materialized.

Beyond that, the failure or perhaps the outright refusal to broaden the tax base by facilitating the creation of new businesses and encouraging the emergence of innovative revenue streams is nothing short of reckless. Only the former Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East, only that Member can say why he sacrificed the revenue of this country for almost a decade by sabotaging the BIR. Only he can say who benefitted, only the Member for Diego Martin North/East.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Mr. Speaker, on a point of order, 48(6).

**Mr. Speaker:** I can ask the Minister of Finance to simply rephrase that.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Thank you. I am dually guided, Mr. Speaker. Only the Member for Diego Martin North/East can justify why his actions contributed to the demise of the Board of Inland Revenue and supported the loss of millions and millions, of millions of dollars of this country's revenue stream.

Crucially, the PNM pushed for a new revenue authority, and ignored the most obvious and responsible solution to our revenue collection challenges. All that was required, Mr. Speaker, was for the Government of the day, the PNM Administration, to strengthen and properly resource the institution that already exists, the Board of Inland Revenue, rather than dismantle it to justify a new, politically-influenced structure. The previous regime chose to burn "de house down", rather than repair its foundation. We choose the opposite, Mr. Speaker. We choose to rebuild and reinforce the existing framework of the BIR on principles of transparency, professionalism and service to the public.

But it is not that the Government of the day, the PNM administration, at the

time, did not know what to do, you know. There is something called the TADAT report, the Trinidad and Tobago Tax Administration Diagnostic Assessment Tool, the TADAT Performance Assessment Report. This is an internationally standardized IMF-supported assessment, conducted by an independent team in September/October 2017, and provided a detailed snapshot of both the strengths and the weaknesses of BIR. That is since 2017. The TADAT report identified deep-rooted deficiencies in the BIR's operation. That included, Mr. Speaker, that the integrity of the tax administration database was low, on time filing and payment rates could not be established with certainty, limited use of electronic services for filing and payment. And I am quoting here from the TADAT report, Mr. Speaker:

- “• Delays in processing taxpayer accounting transactions resulting in inaccurate tax...accounts
- A deficient VAT refund process...
- A weak revenue accounting environment...”

Critically, Mr. Speaker:

- “• Shortage of technical staff”.

Those are the problems identified by the TADAT report, that the Government had in its hands at that time, 2016/2017.

The report also identified a substantial number of strengths, Mr. Speaker, but that was not the interest of the Government of the day, that Government, that PNM Administration. Their preference was to focus on the weakness. And, Mr. Speaker, instead of fixing those identified weaknesses, instead of looking at them carefully—because these are not structurally inherent issues, Mr. Speaker, these are not structurally destructive. These are the exact kinds of long-standing problems that any responsible government should identify and rectify, through capacity building and reform. That is all that was required. The former Government

instead, led by the Member for Diego Martin North/East, chose instead to completely destroy the environment, to completely destroy and undermine the BIR, to completely sidestep those issues in favour of creating a brand new engine, deliberately depriving the Board of Inland Revenue of income, deliberately depriving the Board of Inland Revenue of the resources to justify their TTRA scheme. As a consequence, Mr. Speaker, both the BIR and the Customs and Excise Division have been left languishing for years and years, while the PNM chase their pipe dream.

**Hon. Member:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** The evidence, Mr. Speaker, is stark. The TADAT report, 2017, identified—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** I hear my colleagues opposite blaming the public service, we will come to that. We will come to that. The Board of Inland Revenue's approved staff positions for the year 2017, Mr. Speaker, was supposed to be 1,316 at 2017. Of that, almost half were vacant in 2017. What a caring, sensible Government would have done, would have increased staffing. Instead, they used the fact that they were looking at another option to continue to undermine the staffing, Mr. Speaker. Do you know why? Do you know why? I cannot explain because their focus, Mr. Speaker, was not to fix the problem. Their focus was to see about another opportunity where they can have direct political interference in the operations of the issue.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** That was their focus. They were not interested in increasing revenue collection. They were not interested in fixing a long-established, independent institution. Their focus was on trying to see how they could get their

hands in the cookie jar.

The organization—

**Mr. Gonzales:** Mr. Speaker, 48(6)

**Mr. Speaker:** I do not think any improper motive was imputed and I think if you—

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Perhaps it is a loose comparison which the Member was making. I will put it as high as that, but again, it is contextual. One would recall the judgement of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council—

**Hon. Member:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Hang on a second, I am explaining. When the Judicial Committee gave their judgment, one of the matters that was of grave concern, which they did not have to express an opinion on, was whether or not the proposed entity was susceptible to any sort of influence. So, I rather suspect that the unfortunate reference to “cookie jar” would really have meant that, and I would ask the Member to clarify that. But it is not really imputing any improper motive on anyone, quite frankly.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, it seems that the truth offends. It seems that the truth offends. So let me clarify it for the Member opposite, although I am sure he is very well aware of what I was saying. Their focus was not on fixing the problem. Their focus was on creating a space where there can be live political interference in the operations of the institution.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** And for that, Mr. Speaker, I will move on. It is the height, Mr. Speaker, of irony and hypocrisy to deliberately break down an institution and then claim they need a new one, because the one they broke down has broken down.

Mr. Speaker, the former Administration tried to sell the TTRA as a panacea for revenue collection, insisting that a semi-autonomous revenue authority could magically boost tax sales. The facts are, Mr. Speaker, that that is completely untrue. There is sufficient evidence, there are sufficient World Bank reports, et cetera, Mr. Speaker, there is a substantial amount of information that says otherwise.

**Mr. Manning:** Name one.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Name one?

**Mr. Manning:** Name one.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** One?

**Hon. Member:** [*Interruption*]

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Mr. Speaker, the former junior Minister seems to not have been paying attention because he was part of the Government that put this in place; same individual. But let me tell you, for his edification, for a few seconds. The IMF and the World Bank have both established reports in which they have said that the semi-autonomous revenue authorities, the SARAs for your benefit, since you would not be aware, do not work—they do not work better than what we have in Trinidad and Tobago, but you already knew that. You already knew that. The point has already been made, Mr. Speaker. The point has already been made that the Government already knew what the problems were. They already knew—because of the international experience here, the international reports that exist, they already knew that what they were proposing would not be better than what is there. The focus was never on improving. The focus was on getting an opportunity to create a space for political interference, Mr. Speaker.

I would not bother to go into the detail of the various studies. I think the

former Minister, I think the Member for San Fernando East should go home and do some research—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—of his own. If you come here unprepared, that is not my fault. If he is not aware of his responsibilities when he signed on for this job, he should stay home.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Moving on, Mr. Speaker, moving on.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** The noise, the noise, the noise, the noise, the noise, Mr. Speaker.

Moving on. The former Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East, has repeatedly told this country about a \$10 billion tax gap; \$10 billion, meaning that revenue that could have been collected under existing tax laws, but was not, was due to non-compliance, evasion and administrative shortcomings. He has repeatedly talked about \$10 billion. It is a court matter as well, \$10 billion, Mr. Speaker. But while he is complaining about a tax gap, every action taken by that Government is to widen that tax gap because they have deliberately undermined the agency responsible for pursuing tax evaders, that is the Board of Inland Revenue. They have deliberately done that. And over the last nine and a half years, while they have pursued the TTRA, they have short-staffed the BIR to the point, Mr. Speaker, where neither the BIR has the resources, nor the TTRA, to go after the tax evaders.

Again, Mr. Speaker, when a government, that is that Government, deliberately took an opportunity to remove tax compliance networks, to remove the individuals, the institutions that were responsible for tax compliance, that benefits only tax evaders. That only benefits one group of people. I have just answered the

question, who would benefit when the PNM Administration did what it has done to the Board of Inland Revenue, Mr. Speaker. The PNM Administration, their actions showed a total lack of concern for future generations; a total lack. It is shocking, Mr. Speaker, that despite recognizing a significant tax gap and having expert tools like the TADAT report of 2017, the former Government simply refused to take action. Mr. Speaker, I have a long—a substantial number of pages of issues about what was wrong with the TTRA, but this has already been ventilated in the public domain. This has already been ventilated in the public domain, so I want to treat with a couple of issues that may emerge.

Mr. Speaker, even today, the Board of Inland Revenue is reeling, even today, from the actions taken over the last nine and a half years by that Government; even today. Mr. Speaker, you have to ask yourself, who wanted it? Because on two occasions, when the Minister of Finance then, when the PNM Administration brought the TTRA to the public, the public refused it; on two occasions, in 2010 and, Mr. Speaker, now; refused it.

**9:05 p.m.**

Mr. Speaker, would you believe that when they brought the TTRA forward, when the PNM administration brought the TTRA forward, they cajoled the public servants, they threatened them, they warned them, Mr. Speaker, that if you did not take this, you are out. That is what they did. They threatened the jobs of public servants, Mr. Speaker, and would you believe that despite these brutal threats to the incomes of persons in the public service, only 32.6 per cent of the public servants employed at the BIR and Customs and Excise Division chose to move to the TTRA? Only 32 per cent. Mr. Speaker, I want to use the opportunity today from this platform, in this House tonight, to salute those individuals, the Public Services Association—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—the members of the public service of this country who are here tonight represented, having spent the entire day to come to support this Government for removing this horrible TTRA. I salute those public officers who decided that they would sacrifice themselves as opposed to bending to the political machinations of the PNM administration of the day, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, this 32 per cent of the persons, that desperate attempt, the then Minister of Finance, the Member for Diego Martin North/East on seven, seven occasions came and had to extend the deadline time, had to extend the deadline time for people to leave because people were not going to leave, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, so the population did not want it, and the workers did not want it. Who wanted it? Members of the PNM administration, they wanted the TTRA.

Mr. Speaker, but let us deal with what TTRA has done, what their actions have done to us, Mr. Speaker. The shift to the TTRA conducted by the Member for Diego Martin North/East and his colleagues actually resulted in a decrease in revenue collection, as staff were depleted at the Board of Inland Revenue and at the Customs and Excise Division while they were waiting on TTRA. So on the one hand, you are cutting down BIR, but TTRA is not rising. That administration, the actions headed then by Diego Martin North/East, sabotaged the country, Mr. Speaker. Billions of dollars that potentially could have been in the trough, billions of dollars that could have been in the coffers, billions of dollars that could have been used to spend to the benefit of Trinidad and Tobago were lost.

Some people, Mr. Speaker, living large. Some people hiding in their homes counting the money that they did not have to pay in taxes because they were able to get away scot-free because of the actions of this heartless PNM administration, because of the actions piloted and pivoted by the Member for Diego Martin

North/East. “But time longer dan twine, Mr. Speaker, time longer dan twine.” Jail coming for some, jail coming for some people, Mr. Speaker, because this Government, unlike that Government, is not going to facilitate tax evasion.

Mr. Speaker, the attempted transition to the TTRA under the PNM left great uncertainty concerning the future of contract staff, generally at both the Customs and Excise Division and the BIR, and particularly in the crucial area of information technology. While the rest of the world is moving forward with information technology, Mr. Speaker, their actions sabotaged the improvement, the enhancement of the performance of the BIR because the technology that exists there has been sabotaged.

Contract officers, Mr. Speaker, faced non-renewal of fixed-term contracts, resulting in month-to-month arrangements due to the upcoming TTRA implementation. So where somebody was supposed to get a five months’, a six months’, a one-year, a two-year, a three-year contract, Mr. Speaker, because they were holding on to TTRA, just like with dragon gas, just like with dragon gas, because they were holding on to the pipe dream, they sabotaged the operations of what they had in their hands, Mr. Speaker.

Public servants became demoralized. They were being brutally beaten down, they were being disenfranchised by the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin North/East and he must never be forgiven for that, Mr. Speaker. He must always be held to account, Mr. Speaker. Some personnel left their jobs for security reasons, some people left their jobs because they had to find some other form that was much more stable, a much more stable income to feed their families. That is what happened when you did what they did, Mr. Speaker, which is undermine the integrity of the Board of Inland Revenue.

Mr. Speaker, the situation at that time deteriorated to a point where the

Petroleum and Large Taxpayer Business Unit, tasked with monitoring revenue from entities responsible for approximately 85 per cent of total tax collections, is today operating at just 10 per cent of its capacity; 85 per cent of the revenues collected by tax, we now have 10 per cent of the population. They are not collecting even close to what they should have because this PNM administration, sitting on the opposite side, undermined the BIR.

So, Mr. Speaker, we are losing money hand over fist. The country is losing money hand over fist, and it irritates me, Mr. Speaker, because as Minister of Finance, I am seeing what they have done with the economy. I have seen how they have crashed the economy and I am also seeing on the opposite side where there was revenue to be collected. What kind of heartless, cruel, shameless people would sabotage the country like this and then they came right afterwards and implemented tax and tax and tax, you know. They refused to collect what was easily collected and chose instead to tax and tax and tax, more. Mr. Speaker, I repeat, only the Member for Diego Martin North/East can tell this country who benefited from that largess that they facilitated.

So, Mr. Speaker, whether it is by design or sheer incompetence, the PNM's efforts to establish the TTRA suffocated both the BIR and the Customs and Excise Division by depleting the human resources of these two institutions. Ironically, Mr. Speaker, despite the critical staff shortage, this very same Member for Diego Martin North/East in 2020 boasted and celebrated the BIR that he was sabotaging. That is, the Member for Diego Martin North/East boasted that the BIR had done so well, they had collected \$2.3 billion in tax, more than five times the original estimate that they were supposed to collect. He was celebrating the BIR then, although he was sabotaging them. There is something nefarious and evil about that kind of action. While you are patting people on their backs—

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Yes. Yes. Member, can you rephrase that, please?

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Absolutely. Thank you very much for your guidance. There is something extremely disturbing—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—psychotically disturbing. There is something, very, very wrong, morally, spiritually and every other way, where a man, a gentleman, an individual could be hugging you up and telling you, you are doing very, very well, while stabbing you in your back, something is desperately wrong with that. I am sure you agree.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** I do not know, Ma'am, if you are accustomed to that kind of conduct, but it is unacceptable—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** It is unacceptable.

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** It is unacceptable. It is unacceptable.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Let us refrain from the unnecessary crosstalk. It is 9.13 in the night. Let us refrain from the unnecessary crosstalk.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Yeah. Those are experts. Mr. Speaker, those are experts at stabbing in the back, those are experts of manipulation, those are experts in all sorts of things.

Mr. Speaker, the PNM's establishment—the amount of money they spent to establish the TTRA is also noteworthy. Nearly \$12.8 million was spent from financial year 2016 to financial year 2025, yet to date, the TTRA had no results,

none. 2016 to 2025 they spent \$12.8 million with nothing to show for it. No funds were allocated in 2016 and 2017. The numbers are there, Mr. Speaker. But do you know upon taking office what we discovered, what this UNC administration discovered? We discovered that for the inactive TTRA, with just 34 employees, they were spending almost \$1 million a month, \$1 million, Mr. Speaker, for 34 employees and this is after—from 2016, you know.

They have been pursuing TTRA from 2016 and after 2016 to—how much years is that? That is nine years, nine years seven months they have been pursuing the TTRA and now we get the point where they are spending millions of dollars with nothing to show for it. I understand that there are still more bills, Mr. Speaker, there are still more bills. There is still a \$3.6 million bill to be paid for services rendered to those on the opposite side that is still outstanding for the TTRA. So we would have been paying upwards of \$16 million with nothing to show for it. Taxpayers have been brutally taken advantage of. On the one hand, they are paying those persons on that side, and on the other hand, they are taking away from the BIR, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, we could do better than that. Anybody could do better than that and we must do better than that, Mr. Speaker. The millions of dollars spent on establishing the TTRA should have been spent on the existing human resources and infrastructure. The millions spent on establishing the TTRA should have been spent on improving and increasing the resources, the human resources and the infrastructure at the BIR. Had that been done, Mr. Speaker, we would have been in a much better condition today financially; had that been done.

Mr. Speaker, alternatively, had that been done, we would have been generating that \$10 billion tax gap that the Member likes to speak about. We would have been treating with that; our revenue streams would have increased by

billions instead. Mr. Speaker, we have lost \$10 billion on average per year.

Mr. Speaker, the money that they spent—so that is if they had fixed the BIR we would have generated money. But the money that they actually spent, that should have been spent for national benefit, the country could have benefited from more scanners for the Customs and Excise Division to aid in the interception of illicit goods and the war against crime. That is what we should have spent that money on; they did not.

The country could have benefited from software upgrades to the ASYCUDA and the GenTax systems to make both customs and tax processes more efficient and secure. That is what they should have done. The country would have benefited from the hiring of more staff, both at the Board of Inland Revenue and the Customs and Excise Division to ensure proper service to the country. That is what that Government should have done. That is what it falls to this Government to do. They wasted nine and a half years, Mr. Speaker, and spent millions and millions of dollars to do it. Mr. Speaker, I can go on and on about how this money could have been spent properly, “inno,” on and on. Opportunity cost, wasted opportunity. However, the greatest atrocity we must recognize is that whether there was a TTRA or not, the basic tenets of the Board of Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise, those basic assets, those basic institutions required immediate attention but were instead left for nine and a half years to languish despite the fact that scanners, GenTax and ASYCUDA intended to be fully utilized by the TTRA.

So on the one hand, they are talking about they wanted IT, but the source of the IT was the BIR. On the one hand, they said they needed employment, they needed tax experts, tax persons, persons with experience and expertise in tax collection, and on the other hand, they were suffering them and throwing them away. Again, the gentlemen and gentle women of the Public Services Association,

kudos to them. Those who remained accessible, Mr. Speaker, will show where this country could have gone and should have gone, had it not been for those on the opposite side.

**9.20 p.m.**

Mr. Speaker, the PNM in office prioritized recruiting an executive team for the TTRA at the expense of \$1 million per month instead of making small, meaningful investments in the areas that really mattered. They sacrificed the revenue of this country, Mr. Speaker, and I really hope that at some point in time they could tell the country, maybe in their contributions, one of them, one of those on the opposite side could explain why. Because, Mr. Speaker, it is predictable. They are coming with another TADAT report. The one that they refused to follow that they burned down, that they allowed to burn down, they are coming with a new TADAT report to say, well, this is what the TADAT report says. The first TADAT report that was done that pointed out the assessment and the faults and the flaws, Mr. Speaker, that never spoke about a TTRA. That report never mentioned a TTRA. That report told you, these are the flaws, fix them. They refused to.

Mr. Speaker, I have already established what the government has done, that former government, which is why they are on that side, having already established why the country has again, rejected them, Mr. Speaker. Let me just spend two minutes on the Bill. This Bill.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Hold on. Calm yourself. Calm yourself.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** The Bill, Mr. Speaker—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—I have spent the last few minutes justifying. You see, Mr.

Speaker—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—unfortunately, those on the other side, their ears, I “doh” know, they say in Trinidad, “stick break in their ears”, so they only hear what they want to hear. They chose to ignore the facts that I was pointing out, their flaws. They chose to deny that those flaws exist. They chose to ignore the fact that they cost this country over \$10 billion per year.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** They chose to ignore the fact that they have suffered public servants, that they threatened public servants.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** That is what they choose to ignore. But this Government on this side—

**Hon. Member:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** “Doh” speak to me, ma’am. “Mine yuh business.” Pay attention. Listen, you might learn something. Mr. Speaker—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I will go on. I will ignore the babbling and the noise from persons on the other side. Perhaps when next the opportunity presents itself, Mr. Speaker, a very good friend, a man who just scraped through—anyway.

**Dr. Moonilal:** Just say “**Marker**”.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Yeah. Yeah. “**Marker. Marker.**”

**Dr. Moonilal:** “Yuh go give dem horrors.”

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** “**Marker. Marker. Marker.**”

**Dr. Moonilal:** “**Marker** coming.”

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** “Marker.”

**Mr. Speaker:** Let me just remind you, you have three minutes more.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Three minutes, Mr. Speaker?

**Mr. Speaker:** Yes. You have three minutes more.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Full time?

**Mr. Speaker:** Full time.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Full time. Thank you. Mr. Speaker, there are three clauses of this Bill. There are three clauses in this Bill, and these three clauses, Mr. Speaker, are enough to get rid of nine and a half years of mischief here.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** The clauses are very simple, Mr. Speaker. The clauses are very simple. The clauses are very, very simple so I will treat with only one of the three clauses. I know the Members may be upset on the other side as to why I am not treating with clause 1. But if they pay attention they would know what clause 1 is. If they pay attention they would know what clause 2 is too. And they are not sure, there are explanatory notes that will explain to them, Mr. Speaker, but there is a clause 3—clause 2. Sorry. That is the proclamation clause. The proclamation clause is important to understand why it is there, Mr. Speaker.

You see, Mr. Speaker, the TTRA is in the process of being wound up. The TTRA is in the process of being wound up and there are still a lot of things that have to be done. A lot of issues have to be saved. A lot of matters including private citizens, private information that the TTRA still holds, and that needs to be securely passed back on to where it belongs which is the Board of Inland Revenue, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago public finances have reached a decisive

crossroads. As a responsible Government we affirm that the era of living off easy energy windfalls is over. Mr. Speaker, the path forward is clear. The Government, this Government, Mr. Speaker, has taken a clear decision to properly equip and resource the Board of Inland Revenue to do the job it was essentially set up to do many, many decades ago, and a job it has proven that it has been able to do. In closing, Mr. Speaker, I ask my colleagues on the other side to repent for the decade of hell they have put this country through by supporting the repeal of the TTRA.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Do the right thing for once. I challenge them. Do the right thing for once and to unite behind the efforts to strengthen and reform the Board of Inland Revenue, Mr. Speaker. Our nation's development depends on our ability to collect the revenues that our laws rightly demand. We owe it to the citizens of this country to ensure that our tax administration is fair, efficient, and above reproach. The days of negligence and politically-driven experiences are over. I recommend this repeal Bill to the House, and I urge all Members to join us in acting in the best interest of our citizens and our Republic's financial health. Together, Mr. Speaker, I believe that we could build a tax system that earns the trust of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Diego Martin North/East.

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

**Mrs. Robinson-Regis:** Hold on. Procedure.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Diego Martin North/East. Yes. Sorry. Procedure.

*Question proposed.*

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Diego Martin North/East.

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

**Mr. Colm Imbert** (*Diego Martin North/East*): Yes. Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, the previous speaker knows that he is not serious.

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

**Mr. Scotland SC:** Everybody knows that.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** He knows that he is simply an instrument to pander to the partners in their coalition, if I want to call it. You know, Mr. Speaker, when one looks at the performance of the UNC Government in terms of revenue, because this is all about revenue, and if one goes to the *Review of the Economy 2015*, Appendix 21, “Central Government Fiscal Operations...”, one will see that for every single year that the UNC was in power between 2010 and 2015, despite claims to the contrary, false claims, the UNC Government ran a budget deficit. And this is why this former administration decided to deal with the matter in a proactive manner rather than running away from the responsibilities of a responsible government.

If one looks at the deficit: in 2010 it was \$2.8 billion; in 2011, \$2.3 billion; in 2012, \$4.5 billion; in 2013, \$6 billion; in 2014, \$4.4 billion and in 2015, \$7 billion. Those are all budget deficits, because during that period what the UNC did, and this is why we are in the situation we are in now as a country, what the UNC did is that it grew expenditure, public expenditure from \$46 billion in 2010 to \$62 billion in 2015, but the revenue did not keep up with the expenditure. So you had a situation where in 2010, revenue, total revenue was \$44 billion, total expenditure was \$46.7 billion. But in 2015, total revenue was \$54 billion and total expenditure \$62 billion. I am certain with what I am seeing from this administration, that this pattern would repeat itself over the next five years and

probably much worse because they do not have a clue, they have no understanding.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** And as far back as 2013, as far back as 2013, the IMF—and, of course, the statement made by the Hon. Minister was nonsense, that the IMF does not recommend a revenue authority. That is utter nonsense. That is why the Hon. Minister could not produce a single precedent—

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—to prove that untruth—

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—because it does not exist. But in 2013 March—

**Mr. Gonzales:** Incompetent.

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—the IMF did a Trinidad and Tobago country report, this is when the UNC was in Government—

**Mr. Gonzales:** Incompetent.

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—entitled Enhancing Revenue and Non-Energy Growth, an Agenda for Comprehensive Tax Reform. And the previous administration received that in 2013. And this—I am just going to deal with one aspect of it. I quote:

The efficiency and administration of the value added tax system is being strongly compromised. In 2012, 64 per cent of all sales were either zero rated or exempt. 50 per cent of imports were not subject to VAT of which 73 per cent was zero rated. Numerous tax preferences—of the former administration —have largely deteriorated the VAT tax base and seriously undermined VAT revenue productivity.

There are also open avenues for tax evasion and leakage reflected in the VAT C-efficiency ratio. For the last decade it has fluctuated around 0.4,

much lower than many other countries of similar developmental level.

Lower than many CARICOM countries and internationally.

New Zealand has a VAT efficiency ratio, for example, of 0.87.

So it was no secret to the former administration that there were serious problems with tax collection, serious inefficiency in the Inland Revenue Division. Serious inefficiency in the Customs and Excise Division but they failed to deal with it, because all they were interested in is spending money. That is all they were interested in doing. They were not interested in doing any work, and that is why in the Minister's presentation he has not come up with anything of any substance. He just spent all his time just hurling invectives across the Floor, uttering words that are unparliamentary such as "evil" which he should have been made to withdraw and apologize for.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** That is all he did, just blustered noise, carrying on, ranting and raving, but he was not dealing with any facts. And let me deal with some facts now.

I heard the Leader of Government Business in an earlier debate, and I heard the Minister also making this untrue statement, that the TTRA would allow the Minister of Finance to get inside people's tax records and their personal and private information. That is a complete untruth. And I will read from the decision of the Privy Council in the *Terrisa Dhoray* matter which I am sure you, Mr. Speaker, although you should not be entering the debate, I am sure you are familiar with it. *Terrisa Dhoray v. the Attorney General of Trinidad and Tobago* which is JCPC/2024/0051. And there is a particular part of that judgment that says at 10:

"The adequacy and effectiveness of the safeguards from political interference and improper pressure"

And with your leave, I will read the whole thing, this whole paragraph into the record. This is what the law Lords had to say unanimously. There was no dissent.

“There is nothing to suggest that the Authority is a device or a sham...

...there are safeguards that prevent either the Board or the Minister from playing any part in the day to day operations of the Authority. The Board (although appointed by the Minister) is comprised of professional people with relevant experience and skills; and its chair and vice-chair are appointed for five-year terms... It is charged with responsibility for setting and oversight of management policies for the Authority but”—it—“has no responsibility for any of the Authority’s revenue functions... Further, there is an express prohibition on the Board giving directions to the Director General or any employee of the Authority with respect to these revenue functions... The Board is also prohibited from accessing any information about individuals or entities obtained by the Authority in the exercise of its functions, or documents concerning legal actions by or against the Authority to enforce revenue laws or in relation to the functions of the Director General... Moreover, the Minister may only give general policy directions to the Board in relation to the Board’s own functions...and is given no statutory authority to give directions to the Authority.”

**9.35 p.m.**

That is the truth. So this nonsense about how—

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—the Minister, this Minister, created a law that would allow him to dig into people’s personal tax information was a colossal, and is a colossal untruth.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Colossal untruth.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Diabolical.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Yes.

And the other problem that I have is that when you look at the history of the UNC, in 1999, the UNC passed legislation called the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation Act. Prior to that, there was a postal division within the Government, it was a part of the public service. In passing the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation Act, the Government abolished the postal division and it give the public servants these options, and this is in section 36(1) of the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation Act.

“This section applies to an officer who on the date of assent of this Act—

- (a) holds a permanent appointment to; or
- (b) holds a temporary appointment to, and has served at least two continuous years in,

a public office specified in the Third Schedule.

(2) A person to whom this section applies may within three months of the date of assent of this Act, exercise one of the following options:

- (a) voluntarily retire from the public service on terms and conditions agreed between him or his appropriate recognized association and the Chief Personnel Officer;
- (b) transfer to Trinidad and Tobago Post”—this is the new authority—“with the approval of the Public Service Commission on terms and conditions no less favorable than those enjoyed by him in the Public Service...”

And:

“(c) remain in the Public Service provided that an office

commensurate with the office held by him in the Public Service prior to the date of the assent of this Act, is available.”

That is a 1999 Act, brought to this Parliament by the UNC, passed by the UNC, and defended in court by the UNC. And that particular section I just read resulted in a famous decision called the Martha Perch decision, where the Privy Council upheld the right of a government—in this case, it was the UNC Government—to abolish a public service division, create a statutory authority and give public servants these three options. But that was not the end of it, the UNC was not finish there.

In the year 2000, they passed an Act called the Civil Aviation Act, and let me go now to section 26 of the Civil Aviation Act:

“A person who, on commencement of this section, is a public officer appointed to an office listed in the Third Schedule either by permanent or temporary appointment, in which he has served for at least two continuous years, shall within three months of the date of commencement of this section exercise one of the following options:

- (a) to voluntarily retire from the Public Service on terms and conditions as agreed between him or his appropriate recognised association and the Chief Personnel Officer;
- (b) to transfer to the Authority with the approval of the Public Service Commission on terms and conditions no less favourable than those enjoyed by him in the Public Service; or
- (c) to remain in the Public Service.”

So, the UNC passed the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation Act. The UNC passed the Civil Aviation Act. The UNC abolished the postal services division. The UNC abolished the civil aviation division and created these two statutory

authorities, and those public servants who did not exercise this option, they abolished the positions.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** The Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act has these identical provisions in it.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Same clauses.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Same clauses. Exactly the same clauses.

**Hon. Member:** Same thing.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Same thing. Same thing. It is political hypocrisy at the highest for the UNC to do this in 1999—

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—to do this in 2000, and to come back and say, we are undermining and threatening workers. [*Member sucks teeth*] That is why the Minister really had nothing to say. That is why he resorted to all of that nonsense.

Let me deal with another falsehood uttered by the Minister, another political untruth. The Minister alleged—and I heard the Prime Minister say that, and I want to send a warning to the Prime Minister. Stop listening to the Minister of Finance.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** He is going to lead you astray.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** I heard the Prime Minister say this, the hon Prime Minister—

**Hon. Member:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. C. Imbert:** I heard the hon. Prime Minister say this, that only 32 per cent of the public servants in Customs and Inland Revenue opted to exercise the options in the Revenue Authority Act, and I heard the Minister come with that same foolishness today.

Let me give you the facts, Mr. Speaker. There are 1,268 officers between the Inland Revenue Division and the Customs and Excise Division; 684 in the Inland Revenue Division and 584 in the Customs and Excise Division. Of those, as of January 2025, when faced with the options I just read out, that we copied almost exactly from the UNC model of 1999 and the UNC model of 2000—

**Mr. Young:** As approved by the Privy Council.

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—as approved by the Privy Council as being perfectly reasonable in a society that has respect for rights and freedom of citizens, section 13 of the Constitution, 40 of the 1,268 opted to take voluntary retirement; 443 opted to transfer to the authority proper; 191 opted to transfer to the Enforcement Division of the Revenue Authority; 284 chose to remain in the public service, of course, if there was a position available to them; and 310 did not respond.

When I went to school, Mr. Speaker, 310 out of 1,268 was 25 per cent. It is still. So 75 per cent—**Hon. Member:** Wow.

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—75 per cent of the combined staff of Inland Revenue and Customs and Excise chose to exercise one of the options in the TTRA Act.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, 75 per cent could never be 32 per cent; cannot be. And if the Members opposite want to play with semantics—

**Mr. Manning:** The Minister of Finance—[*Inaudible*]

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—if they want to play with semantics, 443 persons chose to go into the mainstream Revenue Authority and 191 persons chose to go into the Enforcement Division of the Revenue Authority, a total of 634, which is 50 per cent of the total officers now. You have the others who said they will stay in the public service, some will retire and so on. So how on earth could 32 per cent could be equal to 50 per cent or 75 per cent? That is why I am telling the Prime Minister,

stop listening to the Minister of Finance. He will lead you astray.

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

**Mr. Gonzales:** Embarrassing.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** He will lead you astray.

Now, let us deal the TADAT report because the Member for—what is he now? Fyzabad?

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** I think he had to leave wherever he was and go to Fyzabad, and I heard the Prime Minister say that, you know.

**Mr. Young:** Yeah, she said that.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** There was a problem with representation.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** The Constituents, the constituents. “Where he was before? Ah cyah even remember where he was before”.

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

**Hon. Member:** “Dey didn’t want him. He went Fyzabad”.

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

**Mr. Young:** “We here. We here. We eh running”.

**Dr. Gadsby-Dolly:** “We right here”.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Members.

**Hon. Members:** [*Continuous crosstalk*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Members.

**Hon. Members:** [*Continuous crosstalk*]

**Mr. Padarath:** [*Inaudible*]—maxi-taxi.

**Hon. Member:** Really?

**Mr. Speaker:** Members, order, please. Let us just get on with it, shall we?

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, I came here to work. I did not come to play.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** I did come to just throw words, meaningless words, and spew venom and scream at Members opposite. “Leh meh deal—let meh give some more facts”.

The 2017 TADAT performance assessment, following the 2013—let me repeat. Let me repeat.

**Mr. Gonzales:** “You on probation”.

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. C. Imbert:** There was a 2013—

**Mr. Gonzales:** “You not getting yuh maths right”.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Mr. Speaker, I am being disturbed by Members of both sides.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Well, I think—I do not think you are calling on me to make a ruling. Perhaps, you are calling on yourself to exercise a bit of moral suasion to your right.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** It is left and right, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Both sides.

**Dr. Gadsby-Dolly:** Not this side.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** So remember the UNC had got a report from IMF since 2013, which exposed the weaknesses in terms of tax evasion and leakage. Let us go to the 2017 TADAT Performance Assessment Report, which is just 18 months,

actually, after we came in. And what do we see with the Inland Revenue Division that, according to hon. Minister, you could fix it with the wave of your magic wand. Just do so, “waaashhh” [*Member waves hand*] and all of a sudden, the Public Service Commission, an independent institution—all of a sudden, the Public Service Commission that could not fill the vacancies in the Customs and Inland Revenue Division, while the UNC was in power both from '95 to 2001, and from 2010 to 2015, the Public Service Commission could not fill the vacancies. But all of sudden, with a new Minister, he will wave his magic wand, and all of sudden, the Public Service Commission will just fill all the vacancies one time; one time. They are living in la-la land.

But let me go now to what TADAT had to say, this is the taxes Performance Assessment Report. First Indicator.

“...Accurate and reliable taxpayer information.

The accuracy and reliability of the taxpayer registration database is low due to unsystematic application of registration update and maintenance procedures...”

Score: “D”. There are four levels, A, B, C, D. D, of course, is the worst. So they got a D for that.

“...Knowledge of the potential taxpayer base.

Actions and initiatives to identify and recruit unregistered taxpayers are limited and irregular...”

They got a “C” for that. That is the third worst.

“...Identification, assessment, ranking, and quantification of compliance risks.”

The Inland Revenue Division...

—this is after they were in government for five years and they did so much, and

there were able to fill every position magically.

The Inland Revenue Division—“...does not use intelligence gathering and research initiatives to build knowledge on compliance levels...”

They got a “C”.

Next Indicator:

“...Mitigation of risks through a compliance improvement plan.

The”—Inland Revenue—“...does not have a comprehensive compliance improvement plan.”

They got a “D” for that, the lowest score.

“...Monitoring and evaluation of compliance risk mitigation...

No formal mechanism in place to monitor and evaluate compliance risk mitigation activities.”

They got a “D” for that.

Next one.

“...Identification, assessment, and mitigation of institutional risks.”

What I have to say about that:

“No formal mechanism is in place to monitor and evaluate compliance risk...”

“D”.

“The process of identification, assessment and mitigation of institutional risk is still being developed.”

“D”, the lowest score.

“...Scope, currency, and accessibility of information.

A wide range of information on their obligations is available to taxpayers at no cost but it is not always current. There is no information on taxpayer entitlements.”

“D”, the lowest score.

“...Scope of initiatives to reduce taxpayer compliance costs.

There are no specific simplified record keeping and reporting arrangements for small taxpayers and no pre-filled tax declarations are available.”

Score: “D”.

“...Obtaining taxpayer feedback on products and services.

Taxpayer feedback on products and services is obtained on an ad hoc basis...”

Score: “C”.

“...On-time filing rate.

Overall, the data provided to rate this indicator...are inconsistent and unreliable...”

“D”.

“...Use of electronic filing facilities.

Returns are predominantly filed manually.”

“D”.

“...Use of electronic payment methods

Payments of core taxes are made predominantly in cash and checks...”

“C”.

“...Timeliness of payments.

Almost all VAT payments are reported to be made on time...However, this relatively strong performance may not be a true reflection of the obtaining reality...owing to unreliable data on payments due...”

**9.50 p.m.**

And, this is also supported by an unreliable taxpayer registration database, and we all know about that. You go in a shop, they say, “You want a bill?” If you say,

“no”, that is it. It is not reported anywhere.

D—Stock and flow of tax arrears. Although the level of tax arrears appears to be...high...the assessment team determines that the data is unreliable...

D+—Scope of verification actions taken to detect and deter inaccurate reporting.

D—Extent of proactive initiatives to encourage accurate reporting. There is no system of public and private binding rulings...

D—Monitoring the extent of inaccurate reporting. The extent of inaccurate reporting is not monitored.

D—Time taken to resolve disputes. Disputes are not resolved in a timely manner...”

D—and need I go on, Mr. Speaker? All I am seeing is C and D and D, the Inland Revenue Department unfortunately failed. It failed in virtually every area, okay?

So we got all of this, and we continued to try. We spoke to the Public Service Commission, we talked to the Inland Revenue Division, quite the opposite of what the Minister is alleging, quite the opposite. We gave them all the support that they required, but unfortunately these problems are profound and structural. In 2019 CARTAC came back again and did an update on the TADAT report. There had been no progress from 2017, and so it went along. So it went along, Mr. Speaker.

So, I know that what the Minister is doing, you have persons in your coalition, you made promises to them, you have to pander to them. Well, that is part of a coalition, but good luck, because the only possibility of improving revenue collection in this country was with a semi-autonomous revenue authority. Various administrations have tried to deal with the chronic inefficiencies in Customs and Inland Revenue for the last 50 years. There is nothing that tells the

population, that this particular Minister, this particular administration, would have the political will or have the capacity to deal with the problems in Inland Revenue and Customs using the existing system. There is nothing that tells us that. It was demonstrated between 2010 and 2015; they achieved nothing. It was demonstrated between 1999 and 2001; they achieved nothing. So there is nothing that tells us that they will achieve anything now, Mr. Speaker. But, they carrying on.

Let us look at the whole question of the IMF report on the value added tax system. There was a value added tax report delivered to the Ministry of Finance, again in the 2017 period, and what that report did was to identify that, within the value added tax collection system, there was an estimated tax gap of somewhere in the vicinity of \$5 billion per year. Of that \$5 billion, two and a half billion was policy. So these are exemptions, basic foods and so on, and the other two and a half billion was tax evasion. And, you know the Minister talks about—what is it?—favoured friends and nonsense, nonsense. We know fully well the people that are evading tax in this country, everybody knows, everybody knows who is evading tax in this country. So you go ahead, good luck, Mr. Speaker, good luck to the Government, you want to go ahead and repeal this, no problem, go ahead. You will fail in your efforts—

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

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—to raise revenue to run this country. You will fail, you will fail and you have a very difficult period facing you, very, very, difficult period facing you. Because of the fact—

**Mr. Speaker:** May I remind you, you have one minute—

**Mr. C. Imbert:**—of ordinary time?

**Mr. Speaker:**—of ordinary time.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Yes. May I have the additional time, please?

**Mr. Speaker:** You may.

**Mr. C. Imbert:** Thank you very much. The Minister of Finance must know by now the financial challenges that he faces, must know by now. He must know that since the UNC bloated expenditure in this country, from \$46 billion to \$62 billion per year, the country has become accustomed to an expenditure by the Government of \$60 billion. But you will never collect \$60 billion, especially with your decision to scrap the only possible avenue that you had to increase tax efficiency and tax collection. You will find yourself posting huge budget deficits from now for the whole of your five years. And one wonders what is going to happen then when they post a \$10 billion deficit this year and a \$15 billion next year and a \$20 billion, because you made some promises, you made some promises. And, if one adds up what the promises are, when one adds up what the promises are, you are talking \$10 billion, \$15 billion, \$20 billion additional expenditure.

So you want to spend \$70 billion a year and collect \$50 billion and run a \$20 billion deficit. You go ahead, you go ahead, you go ahead. And, there is another aspect to the Revenue Authority, Mr. Speaker, that is being hidden by the hon. Minister. The fact is that one of the main complaints of public servants is that they are not paid well. They are not paid in accordance with their qualifications, their training, and the work that they do because they are subject to the general system of collective bargaining in Trinidad and Tobago. They are subject to budgetary constraints.

So that is one complaint coming from public servants that they are not paid well. And the other complaint coming from public servants, and you see it reflected in the number of court matters that find themselves into the courts challenging decisions of Permanent Secretaries, challenging decisions of other senior officials with the public service, challenging decisions of the Public Service

Commission itself in terms of promotions and appointments. Because the system just does not work. The system that the British gave us with these service commissions, it just does not work. It does not work. That is why you have 50 per cent vacancies across the board in most Ministries. That is why public servants are not paid properly.

And one of the advantages of the TTRA, which public servants are now abandoning, is the fact that not only would they get improved salaries, they could then avail themselves of incentive payments. Because if you could collect an additional \$5 billion a year, an additional \$10 billion a year and if your payments, your emoluments are subject to performance indicators, and you could get additional bonuses because of enhanced revenue collection, you would be in a much better place. That is the other advantage of the Revenue Authority. Public servants would be paid much more and they could avail themselves of huge bonus payments when the revenue went up. But it is all right. You go ahead, go ahead, go right ahead.

Mr. Speaker, it is unfortunate, it is unfortunate that the Government has chosen to do this. They did not say that they were going to do this. When you look in their “minifesto”, the “minifesto” that they published, all they said was that they were going to make the Public Services Association the bargaining agent for the TTRA. That is all you see in their mini, their labour manifesto. That is what it says, not an unreasonable position, that you make the PSA the bargaining agent for the new revenue authority. That is what they put in their manifesto. But they come into Government, “and pressure take them”, and they have to deal with the promises that they made and we end up in this mess. It is a sad day for Trinidad and Tobago. They will not be able to generate the revenue that we need to run this country. They will not be able to generate the revenue that they need to fulfill all

those promises they made to various people. They just cannot do it. It would be just another five years of doom and gloom and disaster under the UNC, and the PNM will have to come back and rescue the country again. I thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** The hon. Member for La Brea.

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

**The Minister in the Ministry of Public Utilities (Hon. Clyde Elder):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, before I begin my contribution to this substantial Bill here tonight, and I know the night is still young, allow me to congratulate you, Mr. Speaker, on your appointment as Speaker of this House, and to extend those congratulations to the Member for Princes Town on being the Deputy Speaker as well.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And allow me as well, Mr. Speaker, to congratulate the hon. Member for Siparia on once again creating history and blazing her trail in her own indelible way on once again becoming the only female elected Prime Minister for a second time in history.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And of course, Mr. Speaker, allow me to say thank you to the people of Trinidad and Tobago for rejecting what we just heard—

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

**Hon. C. Elder:**—and for overwhelmingly supporting this Government and bringing us into power. It will indeed be remiss of me if I do not say a special and heartfelt thank you to the people of La Brea and Point Fortin—

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

**Hon. C. Elder:**—for ensuring that for the first time in a long time they actually have representation in La Brea and in Point Fortin.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, I believe that by the time I take my seat I would have already contributed more than the former Member of La Brea did in the last five years.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Let me also say thank you to the Member for Fyzabad and the Minister of Finance for piloting this Bill and for his powerful and eloquent delivery as he piloted this Bill, and for giving me this opportunity to make this contribution here tonight. Mr. Speaker, for me this contribution is more than just an opportunity to lend my voice to a debate. You see, Mr. Speaker, for me, it goes deeper than that. It is no secret that there was once a trade union leader of a great, great union in this country, and as a leader of that great union, I would have joined my comrades of the Public Service Association in rejecting and protesting against this TTRA Act.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And while we would have protested, Mr. Speaker, we sang a song and that song was:

When those who labour hold the reins of power, I would like to be in that number.

And, Mr. Speaker, today I am in that number.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, unless the population is fooled and believes otherwise, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West is no comrade of mine. He called me comrade earlier on.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Earlier on, he called me comrade. But you see, Mr. Speaker, a comrade does not do what they did to the labour movement for the last 10 years.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** That could never be a comrade, Mr. Speaker. So he is no comrade of mine and certainly, Mr. Speaker, some may even say that what would have transpired with the Labour Movement and especially with me, that my entry into the politics and into this House is poetic justice.

**Hon. Members:** Yes man. Yeah, yeah. [*Desk thumping*]

**Hon. C. Elder:** But if you want to speak to the lawyers in the House, there is a saying that justice must not only be done, it must seem to be done, and today the public could see justice is done.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, lending my voice here tonight to this debate signals to this country that there are two very important elements that this Government holds dear and takes seriously. Earlier on we debated the Children's Life Fund Bill, which signalled clearly that children mean the world to us in Government.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And now we are debating the repeal of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, which signals clearly that this Government cares about labour more than any other government in this country.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Gone are the days, Mr. Speaker, when workers and trade unions in this Country would be treated with disdain, with contempt, with disrespect, by an evil, wicked, arrogant, vindictive PNM Administration. Gone are those days, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. Members:** “It gone. It gone.”

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, I want to commend my comrades from the PSA, who have stuck it out and are still here with us in the public gallery.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And they have fought long and hard, and again in the labour movement we sing, help will come when help is needed. Comrades, help is here.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, this TTRA as posited by the previous administration, was yet another attempt in the agenda to destabilize the trade union movement, and to get rid of workers and decent-paying jobs in this country. It was a way of attacking the PSA, and to undermine the right to free and fair collective bargaining, of workers employed at the BIR and at Customs and Excise. Once you remove workers, Mr. Speaker, from a position of collective bargaining, and you transfer them to contracted positions, with no security of tenure, then in effect what you will be doing, Mr. Speaker, is moving workers from collective bargaining to collective begging.

**Hon. Members:** Shame

**Hon. C. Elder:** That is what they intended to do. With the previous administration’s decision to form the TTRA, what would have transpired with the creation of this authority, would have been nothing more than a party group since the political directorate would have staffed and stuffed the TTRA with party loyalists, other sympathetic party hacks of the previous administration and I dare say, even the previous Minister of Finance.

Mr. Speaker, this TTRA Act that we seek to repeal here tonight, was always going to be inimical to the best interest of the Members of the PSA, of the workers

of the Revenue Authority—the BIR, sorry, and Customs and Excise. Just imagine, Mr. Speaker, that the Board that they proposed for the TTRA, was a nine-member board and all nine appointed by the Minister of Finance.

**Hon. Member:** “Hmph.”

**Hon. C. Elder:** And that the Minister of Finance will stipulate the terms and conditions of the appointment. And since the Minister of Finance will be appointing the Board, it is possible, and/or likely that the appointment of Board members will be politically aligned to the ruling Government. And of course, I mean, you expect anybody else to put somebody who they do not trust. That is what they had proposed, Mr. Speaker. But thank God for April 28<sup>th</sup>, that we have seen the light and we have gotten relief from that.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And you know, what would have then happened, was that the Board may employ any person on terms and conditions as it deems fit, opening up the entire TTRA now, to political cronyism, an influence which is a regular complaint in the public domain. So imagine right now they are complaining about it, and there is a Union, and there is a service commission. If you abandon the process that gets workers through the service commission, Mr. Speaker, you could just imagine what could happen. And, Mr. Speaker, I am not speaking about a pie-in-the-sky hypothetical situation, you know. No, I am not speaking about that. I mean, there is enough evidence to tell us what would have happened.

Permit me, Mr. Speaker, to bring to your attention and this House’s attention, a newspaper article dated 05 October, 2022, headline:

“Judge upholds ex-BIR Commissioner’s lawsuit against Imbert”

**Hon. Members:** No.

**Hon. C. Elder:** The article goes on to state, Mr. Speaker:

“A former assistant commissioner of the...(BIR) has emerged victorious in her legal battle against Finance Minister Colm Imbert over being treated unfairly in her bid to be appointed chairman of the organisation.”

Mr. Speaker, this is not TTRA, you know, this is BIR. I am not yet talking about TTRA, I am talking about what happened in BIR, Mr. Speaker. So if this is what is going on in BIR, let me finish the article, Mr. Speaker:

“Delivering judgment on Tuesday, High Court Judge Margaret Mohammed upheld Rohonie Ramkissoon’s judicial review lawsuit against Imbert.

Mohammed ruled that Imbert’s decision not to recommend Ramkissoon, who held the post as acting commissioner, for the position, was unlawful and quashed it.”

**Hon Member:** Oh, my goodness.

**Hon. C. Elder:**

“According to the evidence in the case, the legal dispute began shortly before former BIR chairman Ravi Taklalsingh proceeded on pre-retirement leave in January 2021.

The Finance Minister’s permanent secretary wrote a memorandum to the Director of Personnel Administration seeking approval for a then-acting assistant commissioner to be appointed to the post.

Aggrieved by the decision, as her colleague had less experience than her and her fellow three commissioners, Ramkissoon’s lawyers wrote to President Paula-Mae Weekes questioning the proposed appointment.

After the President’s Office indicated she had not made the appointment, the permanent secretary indicated that the memorandum would be rescinded.

In February last year, Ramkissoon was called to a meeting with the permanent secretary and Imbert, in which she was told that it (the meeting)

was an interview for the position.

During the meeting, Imbert allegedly questioned her about an investigation being conducted by the division's Criminal Tax Investigation Unit (CTIU) into Value Added Tax (VAT) refunds to two taxpayers."

**10.15 p.m.**

**Hon. Member:** What?

**Hon. C. Elder:**

"Ramkissoon admitted she was aware of the investigation but denied any wrongdoing, as she indicated that no allegations were levied against her.

The following month, Ramkissoon was informed she could not be recommended for the post based on the investigation.

In deciding the case..."

—and, Mr. Speaker, this is the part I want us to pay special attention to:

"In deciding the case, the judge ruled that Imbert did not act fairly, as he only asked Ramkissoon if she was aware of the investigation.

'She was not told that she was a person of interest or informed of the specific allegations against her which caused the Defendant to be concerned,' Mohammed said

'She was not allowed to address the defendant's concerns for denying her the position and therefore not treated fairly and denied natural justice...'"

Mr. Speaker, I wish I had finished the article, eh.

"Mohammed also ruled that Imbert acted irrationally in his handling of the interview."

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

**Hon Member:** That is man.

**Hon. Member:** That is him.

**Hon. C. Elder:**

“In my opinion, there was no evidence that the defendant considered that the persons who were involved in the approval of the payment of tax refunds were persons other than the Claimant and that the CTIU was still conducting enquiries where it did not name the claimant as a person of interest,’ she said.

Mohammed rejected claims from Imbert’s legal team that Ramkissoon’s case was academic, as she could not be reconsidered—

**Mr. Imbert:** Point of Order, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. C. Elder:**

“...for the position because she...”—

**Mr. Imbert:** Standing Order 49. The Member obviously does not know, he is new, that the matter is under appeal. It is therefore sub judice.

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Imbert:** It is sub judice. Mr. Speaker, it is under appeal, and I stand by what I say. It is under appeal.

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker—

**Mr. Speaker:** The sub judice rule has always—throughout the swathe of law on sub judice, it is not a hard and fast rule. Even these Standing Orders recognize that. Even the common law on pretrial publicity recognizes that sub judice is not really a hard and fast rule. So if you go through the Standing Order, Member, it says:

“...Subject always to the discretion of the Speaker and to the right of the House to legislate...”—we could skip over that—“...any matter which relates to active proceedings until the matter is ended by judgment or discontinuance...”

So there is a judgment. You will be entitled to come thereafter and to seek the leave to clarify it if there is an appeal. You may do so with my leave. Thank you. Continue.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker—

**Hon. Member:** Irrational as usual.

**Hon. C. Elder:**—I want to advise the Member for Diego Martin North/East to not obfuscate my novelty in this Parliament—

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

**Mr. C. Elder:**—for my ability to properly deliver a licking on them.

**Hon. Member:** Poetic. Shakespearean. This is a trade unionist.

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, I will err on the side of caution—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, I will continue reading.

**Mr. Speaker:** There has been some contribution from the Floor that the appeal has been dismissed. Have you been able to confirm that any appeal is alive and active?

**Mr. Imbert:** As far as I have been aware, it is alive.

**Mr. Speaker:** Sorry?

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

**Mr. Sobers:** Mr. Speaker, is it the appeal with the Ministry of Finance and Rohonie Ramkissoon?

**Hon. Member:** Yes.

**Mr. Sobers:** Right. It was dismissed on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February, 2025.

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** No, no, no. Hold on, hang on. For future consideration, I would

ask Members when invoking the sub judice rule to pay particular attention to 49(1)(c)

“the Member does not in his comment commit a real and substantial danger of prejudice to the fair determination of a matter.”

So it is a compendium of considerations. So I will ask Members to pay particular attention and not invoke the rules for invoking the rules sake. It is not a hard and fast rule, first of all, and secondly, the factors which are outlined in the Standing Order are a compendium of factors. So, Member, continue.

**Hon. C. Elder:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, inasmuch as I was in full flight and shut down, could I just request that I get back my injury time, please?

**Mr. Speaker:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. C. Elder:** At the appropriate time, Mr. Speaker. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

I was at the paragraph that said, Mr. Speaker:

“‘In my opinion, there was no evidence that the defendant considered that the persons who were involved in the approval of the payment of tax refunds were persons other than the Claimant and that the CTIU was still conducting enquiries where it did not name the claimant as a person of interest,’ she said.

Mohammed rejected claims from Imbert’s legal team that Ramkissoon’s case was academic, as she could not be reconsidered for the position because she retired with the case still ongoing.

Saying the ministry used the wrong appointment procedure initially, the judge suggested that the judgement would assist Imbert when he has to make similar appointment recommendations in the future and would serve as a

deterrent to avoid another misstep.”

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

**Hon. C. Elder:**

“In the absence of any legislative procedure to guide the Defendant, it is important that he understands that he has a duty to exercise his discretion lawfully, comply with the principles of natural justice and to act reasonably and rationally when making his decision...”

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Those are not my words, those are the words of the judge in the case speaking about the Minister of Finance.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, so when there is a complaint, that based on the structure and the wording and the shape and form of the Act, that the Minister has too much power, you could just imagine if the UNC did not win, what would have happened to all of those workers in to BIR and Customs.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, within the BIR and the Customs and Excise Division, there are certain specific specified jobs that do not exist anywhere else in the public service. So for the other side to say that they had options to stay, to move, to go somewhere else, really and truly, they have no options, you know. It is take it or leave it, or do or die, you know.

**Hon. Member:** Disingenuous.

**Hon. C. Elder:** There are very limited or few equivalent jobs in the wider public service for particular categories. I could name a few, Mr. Speaker: Revenue planning officers, revenue trading officers, revenue officers, valuation and rating officers, tax officers, and I can go on.

Additionally, Mr. Speaker, these specialized workers, they would have pursued additional training and studies in order to attain their jobs and these skill sets will not be easily transferable into other areas and other departments. So then, what do you do with them? Well, I know what they were going to do with them because I know what they did to me. What they were going to do to those workers is nothing different to what they did to the workers in Petrotrin and TSTT, send them home.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, when they moved workers from a permanent job to a contract job, what that does to the worker is that that worker is unable to access loans, whether it is loans to a buy a house or to buy a car. They are unable to live comfortably from month to month because they are wondering after the end of this contract, what is going to happen to me. Will it be renewed? Will I be sent home as they did with others? And therefore, because workers have no security of tenure, it is difficult for workers on contract to have a decent standard of living. But maybe that was the plan, I hope not. And, of course, the Prime Minister would have told us earlier on about the prevalence of contract work in the public service; hundreds of millions of dollars spent on short-term contracts and people on short-term contracts.

And I want to address something the Member for Diego Martin North/East said in his contribution. He made reference to the Civil Aviation Act, the Trinidad and Tobago Postal Corporation Act and said, “De same thing dey do dey, we do it over here.” But it was not the same thing. What is different? I will tell you what is different. What is different is that within the civil aviation and even the postal corporation, and even some of the RHAs, the unions that represented the workers before the authority was created was transferred into the new authority. That is

what was different.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** So there was no need for the PSA to go back and ask again for recognition for civil aviation. There was no need for NUGFW to go back and ask for recommendations within the RHA. It just transferred. With that said, Mr. Speaker, what was going to happen is that—

**Mr. Speaker:** You have one minute again, unless you wish to avail of an extra 15 minutes.

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, can I get my injury time plus the additional time, please?

**Mr. Speaker:** You can get your 15 minutes.

**Hon. C. Elder:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Yes, with the Revenue Authority that they were going to create, Mr. Speaker, the PSA was going to be left outside in the lurch, in the rain, in the dark, and the workers would have been inside there, on their own, by themselves and at the whims and fancies of the political directorate. That is what was going to happen.

**Hon. Member:** Special investigator.

**Hon. C. Elder:** Special investigator.

**10.30 p.m.**

**Hon. C. Elder:** And of course, the Member for Diego Martin North/East made a statement that they will be transferred on terms no less favourable than what they have enjoyed in the public service. But, Mr. Speaker, that cannot be upheld since the officer, upon transferring to the TTRA, will no longer be the beneficiary of a collective bargaining agency and will no longer be afforded the protection of a

union. So it cannot be the same terms and conditions. Because what happened with the Civil Aviation Authority and with the Postal Corporation Act was that the union came across and terms and conditions continued. That is not the same thing that they proposed, Mr. Speaker.

Mr. Speaker, the same salary that they are proposing for the workers of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority, the same infrastructure that they are putting into the Revenue Authority, the same resources that they are expending into the Revenue Authority, the same training and developmental programme that they are executing in the Revenue Authority, if you put that same resource, that same effort, that same programme, that same effort into the BIR and Customs, there will be no need for a revenue authority.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, this Revenue Authority was always intended to deplete the staff and to attack and target the PSA as they did with the OWTU, as they did with the CWU, and all the other unions. They were going to attack workers, send workers home again. Five hundred went home in TSTT. I passed in the first 500. A next 450 went home in 20—well that happened in 2018. A next 450 went home in 2022 in TSTT; 5,000 went home—well all, all, all went home in Petrotrin. Everybody in Caroni Green got fired, everybody in Government Human Resource Services got fired, everybody in TDC got fired. Revenue Authority would have been no different.

And then, I saw recently on social media a hotline created by that side to call and report political victimization if you lost your job.

**Mr. Kesar:** Job loss.

**Hon. Members:** [*Laughter and interruption*]

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, how much more hypocritical can a party get when

they do that?

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Where was the hotline for me when they “throw meh” out of TSTT?

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Where was the hotline for GHRSL workers? Where was the hotline for Caroni Green workers? Where is the hotline for Petrotrin workers? Where is the hotline for Trinmar workers?

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Where was the hotline for Rohini?

**Hon. Members:** Yes, yes.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And they have the gall, Mr. Speaker, they have the gall to posture as if they care but they only care because you see, when I was small, if it was one thing to get me in shape is “ah good licking eh know”. They only care “becuz they geh ah good licking inno”, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** “Dais de only reason why they care”. They did not care before. They were arrogant, dismissive, contemptuous, vindictive, hateful, spiteful against us.

**Mr. Kesar:** Yes, yes. Acrimonious.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And that has not changed. Mr. Speaker, I hold no brief for the former Member for Diego Martin West, none. But all of a sudden, it seems as if it is only him alone was culpable and “all ah dem hands clean”.

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. C. Elder:** But you see, with the TTRA and with every firing of every worker in this country, every one of them on that side is culpable for what happened to us. Everyone, not one shall escape. All, all, all, all, all.

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

**Hon. Member:** All, all, all.

**Hon. Member:** Arima missing. “She gone out.”

**Hon. C. Elder:** Mr. Speaker, you heard a statement was made earlier on by Port of Spain North/St Ann’s West and he said law must never be made on the basis of an existing individual. Well okay. But workers must never be sent home or fired on the basis of an existing individual.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And, Mr. Speaker, before I take my seat, the Member for Diego Martin North/East—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Kesar:** “Take yuh time, take yuh time, comrade.”

**Hon. C. Elder:** The Member for Diego Martin North/East, when he stood up for his contribution, the first thing he said was he highlighted the deficit budgets of the UNC Government between 2010 and 2015. Mr. Speaker, the highest, the highest the budget reached in the deficit between 2010 and 2015 was minus 7.3 per cent of GDP. That was the highest it reached between 2010 and 2015. Mr. Speaker, between 2016 and 20—I will stop at 2021—2016, minus 9.84 per cent of GDP; 2017, minus 10.45 per cent of GDP; 2018, minus 5.89 per cent of GDP; 2019, minus 3.7 per cent of GDP; 2020, minus 10.45 per cent, the highest—but “they say is COVID”, the highest it has ever been; 2021, minus 8.38 per cent and have the temerity to come in this Parliament to tell us that we run a deficit budget from 2010 to 2015 when “he do worse than we”.

**Hon. Member:** Shame, shame.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And, Mr. Speaker, to send home and drive home the contempt that they still have for workers, they still have it. Let me tell you why I say so, Mr. Speaker.

The Member for Diego Martin North/East said, “Well you want to close it down, you want to repeal it, go ahead, go ahead.

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

**Hon. Member:** Go ahead.

**Dr. Moonilal:** That sound like him.

**Hon. C. Elder:** “Me eh know where yuh gehing the money from but you see yuh make promises, yuh made promises”. Those were his words, Mr. Speaker.

**Dr. Moonilal:** It sounds like him.

**Hon. C. Elder:** In response to him, Port of Spain North/St Ann’s West pointed to the gallery and said, “Look dem sit down dey, look dem sit down dey” as if the people who are sitting in the public gallery do not have any family, any life and they do not matter.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** But, Mr. Speaker, you see on the 29<sup>th</sup> of April, this country felt a sense of relief and hope it has never felt before.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And even though we have been left with an empty Treasury, even though we have been left with a country that has run away on crime, even though we have been left with a country that needs fixing badly, Mr. Speaker, tonight we give you the assurance that we will fix it and it will get better.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** I call on my trade union comrades and colleagues tonight, Mr. Speaker, for two things. One, to just exercise a little more patience with us because we now come.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And two, to work together with this Government to increase the productivity and the livelihood of the people of this country.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** Rest assured, Mr. Speaker, rest assured, we would not treat workers with the contempt, disrespect, scorn, hate, evil, wickedness, and vindictiveness that they have been accustomed to for the last 10 years. That is not going to happen with this Government.

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

**Hon. C. Elder:** And, Mr. Speaker, tonight, I am more than honoured, I am more than privileged, I am emotionally moved to be part of this debate to repeal this Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, 2021. Thank you, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Members, please allow me to congratulate the Member for La Brea on his maiden contribution, which can best be described as spirited, lively, and perhaps even colourful. But, nevertheless, congratulations.

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

**The Prime Minister (Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC):** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Thank you so much. Like you, I want to congratulate our Member on his maiden speech today.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I think he has woken up everyone at 10.42 p.m. I will add to your description, it was a very passionate, very passionate contribution because he knows what it is. He understands fully the people on the ground and he understands therefore, the people who really matter, which is all of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. So thank you so much. Thank you.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Today I join the debate and I will not delay us much longer because our Minister of Finance also gave a very factual and spirited contribution. Let us congratulate him.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And I will tell the Member for Diego Martin North/East, who has implored me not to listen to the hon. Minister of Finance on this side and I will give him the assurance that I will listen to our Minister of Finance, but I will not listen to you.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I will not listen to you because you are the one, as you admitted tonight, we are in difficult times and it was you as Minister of Finance for almost the past nine years, it was just somebody came at the end and—

**Hon. Member:** “Kick him out.”

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—knock you off. I was going to say “kick” but maybe it might not be the right word, Mr. Speaker. You were just pushed out at the end there, but you were there, all these years, looking after the financing of our country and I join with my colleague who just spoke. You talked about revenue and expenditure when some of the worst levels of deficit that you were talking about were experienced under your good self, Diego Martin North/East.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Again, my colleague from La Brea, the hon. Member, he said to people, well let us have some patience because “we now come”. But, I can tell you, along with him, “we now come” but we have kept more than one of the promises that we have made. Promise one, with respect to workers, we dealt with the WASA issue. “We tear up the plan”, put it in a dustbin, which we promised.

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

**10.45 p.m.**

Earlier tonight, we kept another promise which was to amend the Children’s Life Fund to help our children.

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

And now, we are carrying through with the wins. We are carrying through with the promises to make sure that everybody wins, now that we are debating to scrap, to repeal the TTRA. And hon. Member for Diego Martin North/East, yes. My answer is yes, we will repeal it. We will do that tonight. We will repeal the TTRA.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I heard you speaking. I heard you speaking. I heard you speaking, you came with the same failed examples, the same issues that you used for the past 10 years, I will tell you, and more, about this TTRA. It is the same thing, trying to convince persons that this is a good thing for Trinidad and Tobago, but those were the same failed boasts that you were making that caused you to be sitting on the next side.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Because no one bought it. No one bought that. No one bought all the things you were saying about the greatness of having a

TTRA. And can I ask you, when you talked about deficits, and revenue, and expenditure in the past 10 years you were there, what revenue did you collect? How much did you bring in with all your grand plans? Let me assure you, Minister, we will repeal this Act with or without your help because we do not need your help.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** We promised, we promised. Remember I always tell you, PNM, “promises never materialize,” but we in the UNC, we will keep our promises to make sure that everybody wins. Today, workers will win, workers will win.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And I will acknowledge, he mentioned coalition partners and promises were made. It was not just about coalition partners. It was because we truly believed that when the workers joined with us, came to us and shared what they were experiencing, the things that were happening—so they did not come there with a fly-by-night plan, Mr. Speaker. They came and showed us, and they told us. I thank the former president of the PSA, who is now a Minister in my Government, Mr. Baptiste.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I thank the present President of the PSA, Felisha—some of them are in the gallery. Can we acknowledge them?

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And you know, they have been here since 1.30 p.m., 1.30 p.m., it is now 10.47 p.m. They are people who stand their ground. They stood their ground.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Because the Minister tried in every way to “lick dem down,” but they are, today, tall and standing taller because we share with them their joys, their dreams, and their hopes for the future of Trinidad and Tobago, and for the future of the workers.

And, you know, that PNM Government—this TTRA is what? Act 17 of 2021. But they have been trying to put this in place since 2010. Do you all remember that? Since 2010, we are now in 2025. But since 2010 to '21, they were trying to force this TTRA into the faces of people in Trinidad and Tobago.

So, they came in 2010, that is before we went into Government, they came with Bill No. 8 of 2010, the TTRA Bill, 2010. They introduced it on January 29, 2010, which was before we went into Government, and then what happened? It lapsed. Because there was so much pushback against it, they let it lapse. They came back again in 2018, Bill No. 11 of 2018, introduced May 25, 2018, what happened? Bill withdrawn. They withdrew it because, again, the pushback was so great. But they never gave up.

You talk about resilience, but it is resilience—and the Minister uses the word all the time, this Member, then Minister, Diego Martin North/East, “foolishness”. Remember, that is one of his favourite words. They continued with this foolishness, coming back, as I say, '10, '18, they did not give up. They came back again, Bill No. 11 of 2019, they introduced it on the 26<sup>th</sup> of November, 2019, and what happened? They let it lapse. Bills do not just lapse, you know. It is the Government in charge that allows the Bill to lapse, why? Because, again, “foolishness”. Nobody was buying into it, and the pushback was very great.

Fast forward to Bill No. 9 of 2021, which is the one that was introduced on the 10<sup>th</sup> of September, 2021, and it was partially proclaimed. So, all the noise, and all the crying, and all the boasting—partially proclaimed. The 2021 Bill partially

proclaimed. And, today, it falls upon us to totally get rid of this and to repeal it. And we come here with a Bill. This is a one-page Bill. A Bill, an Act to repeal the TTRA Act:

“This Act may be cited as the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority (Repeal) Act, 2025.”

Clause 2:

“This act comes into operation on such date as is fixed by the President by Proclamation.”

And it is the Cabinet that will advise the President on a date of proclamation.

And, clause 3—three clauses:

“The Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, 2021 is repealed.”

Do you know the Act that we are repealing, Act 17 of 2021, it contains 682 pages. It contains 682 pages, and here we are, this Bill, a one-page Bill with three clauses, will wipe out all the foolishness that is contained in that revenue Act, all of it, all, all.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So, what was the purpose of that '21 Act? It was to replace the BIR and Customs and Excise Division of the Ministry of Finance. My Government gave assurances to the PSA and the public officers of the BIR and Customs and Excise, that as a priority, we will repeal the Act and here we are. Today, we are keeping that promise.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** It is no secret that we opposed this TTRA Act from the outset, inside and outside of the Parliament. It is not just here that when we came and joined with our partners in the PSA that we took this position, we have opposed this TTRA Act, Bill, whatever they were, from the out-start, in

Parliament and outside of the Parliament. We express the view that it compromises the independence of tax collection and enforcement, and Custom's departments in the public service.

Public officers who, before this, were insulated from political interference, would lose that protection as the Act gave the Minister of Finance the ultimate power of a puppet master. That is what it was, to be a puppet master. And then, the Minister comes here talking about 25 years ago, the UNC in 1999, the Member, former Minister, in 1999, the UNC passed something to abolish the Postal Corporation, I believe. And then, in 2000, to abolish the Civil Aviation Authority and all that was fine and all that was great and good, you know why? Because it was a UNC Government that passed those—that allowed people to accept them, and they went through. Because we ensured that when we did it, we did not just give. We took it to court and won, we took it to court and won, and you should be the last person to “talk bout courthouse”.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** You should be the last person to be talking about courthouses. Do you know the last time the Minister went to court with the Auditor General—shenanigans—I am reading in the midterm review that will come up on Monday with the SFC and then the debate, that \$2 million has to be found to pay the Auditor General to reimburse her for the legal fees that she had to expend to take up the fight in the courthouse against the Minister, \$2 million. But, in that, we do not know how much you paid your “eat ah food” lawyers. We do not know yet, but we will find out, and we will expose it.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So, I say, this Act attempted to give the Minister the powers of a puppet master, all the strings will be tied to his fingers so that he

could have manipulated and weaponized tax collection and enforcement, and Customs laws to the detriment of the innocent public—it would have made it easy to target political opponents, made it easy—

**Hon. Member:** How?

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** If you do not know how, Sir, you really “doh” even belong in this House, you “doh” belong in this House.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** If you “doh” know why you are sitting there, it was because of this, to weaponize the laws, easy to target opponents, easy to target trade unions, easy to target media houses, easy to target dissident voices of those who were brave enough to stand up to this Government. And again, I compliment the workers of this country who took that brave, courageous step.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The PNM manufactured a crisis by starving the BIR and Customs of resources so that they could then point a finger at them and say that they are not working, to “clear track for ’gouti to run”, PNM, “’gouti to run”. That is what it was. They starved them of the resources. And the MP comes back here today to tell us BIR was not working, nothing was happening, they were failing, they could not appoint people to the positions. Right now, the BIR is understaffed and under-resourced. We will fix it.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** But the Minister was there. As a Minister, the Member was there, in the nine-years and did not fix it, did not fix it. Coming here now, nine years later with the same cries and complaints. So, these departments were understaffed and under-resourced. And instead of supporting them so that they could function, the previous administration, what they did, was to create a

new structure that they could politically control that would be outside the jurisdiction of the Public Service Commission.

I heard in the earlier debate, Members on the other side talking about appointment of the Commissioner of Police, and the Police Service Commission is such a great organization and the independence, and they are supporting it because the Police Service Commission came and put a name forward and are doing their constitutional duty and how great it was, how great it was, when with this, you attempted to remove the Police Service Commission from dealing with workers in the PSA.

The Constitution of our country provides and requires that the functions of the Government be entrusted to public officers who will enjoy the protections of Chapter 9 of the Constitution, that is to say, powers of appointment, powers of removal, and the exercise of disciplinary control over the officers, those who are vested in the hands of the Police Service Commission. I remember a former Prime Minister of this country, God rest his soul, God rest his soul, attempted to do away with all the Service Commissions. Of course, that Prime Minister also lost an election—attempted to take away all the Service Commissions. And here it is, this that the Member is boasting about was to remove the Police Service Commission. Maybe we need to look at that. We probably need to look at, again, how they are structured and how they work. But, as they are, they are the only bulwark at this time against a rogue government, against a dictatorial government—it is the PSC. But in passing this law, what you were doing was taking away that protection of public officers.

The critical functions that were being transferred in the TTRA included the assessment and collection of tax. It included the administration and enforcement of the revenue laws, and included enforcement of border control measures, border

control measures, putting in the hands of this independent, supposedly independent TTRA, border control. I am sure my Minister of Defence, Wayne Sturge, will have something to say about that, putting his border control in this manner. That was inconsistent with the intent and structure of our Constitution, to transfer the performance of functions which are governmental functions, from public officers who enjoy the protections, as I have said before, of Chapter 9, to persons who are not public officers and who do not enjoy those protections.

If the TTRA Act is fully operationalized, that new entity would have assumed political control of tax admin, enforcement, in place of existing revenue collections structures which have existed seamlessly, since Independence, you know how long? 61 or more years to date, to date.

**11.00 p.m.**

The Constitution makes specific provisions for the power of appointment and removal, and as I said, this is disciplinary control over such officers. These powers are vested in the hands of that independent body. The intention of our Constitution is clear. It sought to insulate officers from political influence, manipulation and pressure because this could compromise the integrity of the service, contrary to good public admin. Public officers, as I said, are governed by chapter 9 of the Constitution. Section 121 of the Constitution establishes the PSC, a body whose members are appointed in accordance with other provisions of the Constitution.

Members of the Public Service Commission, incumbent with members of other commissions, hold office in accordance, again, with section 126 of the Constitution. They are appointed for fixed terms of office. They may only be removed from office by the President on the grounds of inability to discharge functions or on the grounds of misbehaviour in public office. By section 121(1)

and (7) the power of appointment, removal, disciplinary control over these officers are vested in the PSC. I have the sections here but I need not read them because I am sure the Member for Diego Martin North/East is very aware of these provisions to protect public offices.

I move on to say that the reason for these commissions was set out in a very classic statement by Lord Diplock in a Privy Council case, a case coming out of our jurisdiction, *Endell Thomas v the Attorney General*. Investment jurisdiction over such matters in an independent commission as the PSC, rather than leaving them in the hands of the elected Government of the day, the Constitution is concerned with insulation from political patronage and pressure of public officers. And so the objective was to insulate such officers from the long arm and long reach of a rogue government.

The whole purpose of chapter 8 of the Constitution, now 9, the judgment stated:

“...is to insulate members of the”—public service—“the civil service, the teaching service and the the police service from political influence...”

And so we go on:

“These...commissions, although public authorities, are excluded by section 105... from forming part of the service of the Crown.

In respect of each of these...”—independent—“commissions, the Constitution contains provisions to secure its independence from both the executive and the legislature. No member of the legislature...”—could—  
“...serve on the commission.”

And no member of the Legislative, therefore, could dictate the hiring, the firing, the appointment and the discipline of any of these officers.

But the TTRA Act attempted to place indirectly in the hands of a member of

the legislature, which is to say, the Minister of Finance, to carry out these functions indirectly. The functions of the TTRA included: Assessment and collection of tax and duty, admin and enforcement of law, the control of the borders of TT, the implementation of government policies. These are critical functions that should remain with the central government. The concept of tax admin and enforcement is critical to any government. They are given coercive powers that are analogous to police officers to perform enforcement aspects.

There are certain types of matters that are far too important for the State to have control of them. And again, these include, as I said, taxation, customs, immigration, national security, foreign policy. The assessment and collection of taxes is essential for any government. Without taxes, a government will collapse tomorrow morning. You will not be able to function. The forefathers of our independence and our Constitution had the wisdom, as I said, to insulate these core functions.

The TTRA was well on the way to becoming a PNM party group.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** A party group of the PNM. The Act facilitated the high level of political influence. It might as well have been called—as I say, with due respect, the “Imbert Act” because of the unprecedented amount of power that it gave to then Minister Imbert. Members of the board were to be appointed by the Minister and may be removed by the Minister. That level of control is just out of this world because if you have the power to appoint, and you have is power to dis-appoint, to remove people, then what will they do? They will do your bidding. You will be the puppet master calling—playing the tune. You will be the one getting them to sing to your tune. The members of the board, as I said, that are appointed by Minister, may be dis-appointed, removed by him.

The director general and deputy directors are appointed by the Minister, again, may be removed by him and therefore, are impliedly subject to disciplinary control by him. The DDGE and certain officers from the enforcement division, again, are appointed and removed by, and subjected to disciplinary control of the Public Service Commission. So that is the only one out of all the offices that remain under the Police Service Commission. All other employees of that authority were to be appointed and removed by, and subject to the control of the board, but again, it is a board appointed by the Minister. This is in contrast to the position of bodies which presently carry out the functions of the authority. The comptroller of Customs and Excise, the commissioners of the BIR, and the officers of Customs and Excise and Inland Revenue Division are expressly acknowledged by statute to be public officers for the purposes of our Constitution. The potential for misuse and abuse of power stared us in the face. Political opponents, journalists, independent and dissident voices could be easily targeted.

It must be kept in mind that prior to a matter arriving at the doorstep of the enforcement division, there is a wide range of powers that are given to officers of the BIR and the CED to conduct audits and take other steps to ensure compliance with the law. The powers were intrusive, wide and varied.

The UNC had a philosophical and ideological difference with the PNM on this issue. We believe tax collection and enforcement must remain beyond the reach of political influence and interference.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** It is for this, today, we fulfil our promise to the people by bringing a Bill to repeal that Act. We will, of course, now have to pay attention of remedying the shortcomings in the BIR and in the Customs. Our Government will give the resources necessary, so they can function at optimal

capacity. Indeed, right now, we have a team looking at what best we can do to give the BIR the resources that the BIR needs in order to bring in the revenue, in order to do the job that they are there to do. The TTRA also undermined constitutional safeguards and we said, political interference.

Now, the board would be responsible, under the Act, for recruitment. That board would be responsible for the remuneration. We know what remuneration is? The package, your pay package. And if you are not in the good books, what is going to happen with your pay package? That is why you have an independent, or supposedly independent most times, Public Service Commission.

So that board—recruitment, remuneration, promotion, training and development, performance assessment, conditions of work, discipline, termination of employment, superannuation benefits, all of this in a board appointed by a member of the legislature, a politician, the Minister of Finance. This left the door open for potential favouritism, for political patronage, whereas the BIR and CED are staffed by public officers, insulated from the political directory by virtue of the Constitution. This is why the PNM Government was insistent, from since 2010, on implementing the TTRA provisions; almost two decades, pushing for this TTRA. It was never about improved revenue collection, but it was about control and influence over critical statutory functions of the Government.

Each time—and I told you the times dating back to 2010—the TTRA Bill was brought to the Parliament before, it could not gather the special majority support required and the Bills collapsed. Let me remind you that when they brought it initially in the earlier stages, earlier incarnations, there was a special majority requirement placed in it. They could not get it and we say, thank God for an Opposition who stood against them; who stood against them.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** And then, in 2021, the then Attorney General, Mr. Faris Al-Rawi, laid the Bill again in the form that has now become Act 17 of 2021. The Bill was passed in the Senate on 17 September, 2021, and then in the House on 17 December, 2021, with a simple majority. The then PNM Government twisted the Bill to circumvent the need for the special majority, which the then UNC Opposition objected and protested against it in and outside of the Parliament. And this is what the former Attorney General, Faris Al-Rawi, did with so many pieces of legislation. When he could not get the special majority in the Parliament, really, as I said—

**Hon. Members:** Suratt, Suratt.

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Yeah, Suratt, Suratt. There were two of them, Surat and another one. There were two judgments that we always used.

*[Mr. Speaker rises and motions for Member to sit]*

I am sorry, Sir?

**Mr. Speaker:** You have one minute of original speaking time. Would you like to avail yourself of the additional 15 minutes?

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I will please take the 15 minutes. Thank you. Thank you, Sir. So, they circumvented the special majority provisions and passed with the simple majority. And then to circumvent the necessity for a special majority, the Act sought to create a division within the TTRA called the enforcement division. The Deputy Director General - Enforcement was intended to be a public officer and head of enforcement, to be staffed with public officers charged with enforcement powers of interdiction, charges and seizures. Reporting line of the Deputy Director General - Enforcement, therefore, involved reporting to a political appointee, again, the Director General. Public officers in the enforcement division would also be subject to these instructions and open to

political influence over their powers to search, powers to interdict persons, and persons to seize cargo.

The public officers in the enforcement division then, when they created it, would have been doing these other actions. I want to say that in a democratic country, such powers should never be placed in the hands of a politician. It should never be placed in the hands of a politician—

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:**—who may be easily swayed by party finances and individuals with vested interest to ensure—for example, there are certain cargo, what you call them?—containers, cargos coming in, they go unchecked, they go unsearched, because again, the influence of the directorate is there.

So, despite protestations, the Act was partially proclaimed on 15 March, '22, and then fully proclaimed 14 April, '23. The PSA took legal action through their lawyers, lead by Mr. Anand Ramlogan SC, challenging the constitutionality of the Revenue Authority. The legal contention was doggedly pursued by the PSA all the way to the Privy Council; all the way to the Privy Council. The Privy Council raised red flags over enforcement powers in the Revenue Authority. The Privy Council eventually ruled that provisions of that TTRA Act were constitutional.

So, even though they did the rule the Act was unconstitutional and that this semi-autonomous authority can be used to collect revenue, at several paragraphs of the judgment, the Privy Council noted the potential of political influence since no clear lines were drawn between functions of the enforcement division and other revenue functions of the PNM and of the TTRA.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** The Privy Council noted that if Parliament intended to ensure the enforcement division should be insulated from political

influence and interference, that was not clear from the terms of the Act. So they did not rule out the entire statute. They said it was not clear from the terms.

At paragraph 34 from the judgment, I quote:

“The intent is that the Enforcement Division remains under the control and direction of the Public Service Commission, thus preserving security of tenure and the other protections afforded by chapter 9 of the Constitution...”

**11.15 p.m.**

“35. The appellant contends (with some justification) that this intent has not been fully or successfully achieved. She relies, for example, on the fact that...the Act gives the DDGE the responsibility for ‘the daily management and direction of the enforcement of the Customs laws, the Excise Act and other revenue laws’ while section 14(1)(b) gives the Director General responsibility for ‘the daily management, and direction of the functions of the Authority.’”

It reserves civil enforcement to the DDGE and does not reserve enforcement functions only to that particular officer.

“The appellant...points to section 40 of the Act which purports to confirm this intended division of responsibilities but appears to allocate responsibility for enforcing civil proceedings to the Director General.”

Why am I quoting all of this, Sir? Because this is what the PSA in a matter in the Privy Council, this is what they achieved. This was part of their success, that nothing was really right with the state of this piece of law.

The judgment was also critical of the allocation of powers between divisions of the TTRA because of the clear risk of non-public officers using coercive powers of enforcement. Political appointees, we say again, could use to target and hunt down people they did not like.

This is evident, for paragraph 36 of the judgement made it very clear that there could be, on the face of it, no substantive meaning to the circumstances in which the powers, authorities and privileges conferred by—I need a check time, please, time check, please. Okay, thank you—customs laws and so on.

The Privy Council found that again, Mr. Imbert himself agreed with the criticism of the law and in particular with the confusing definition of enforcement. The judgment specifically highlighted the then Minister's concession. The judgment says the Minister accepts that applying the definition of enforcement strictly in this way does result in the definition of the functions of enforcement division, which is circular, and to an extent unintelligible. I do not know if they were referring to the Minister himself or to the particular provision in the law—

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Unintelligible, unintelligible. So although the Council did not pronounce on the critical weaknesses in the law, it did comment that it is significant. It deliberately left the door open to further legal challenges. And so here we are today. There will be no further legal challenges because today we will keep our promise and we will repeal the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** As I close, Mr. Speaker, we know past political interference underscores flaws in the TTRA framework. There are several claims that took place, which I will not go into tonight, but they are on the public record. And there is no empirical data to show, and I think this is a very important point. I think our Minister of Finance raised some of it. There is no empirical data to show that such an authority like the TTRA, that they were efficient, that they did do the job they were set out to do. So the TTRA was touted as a fix, but the

implementation was not the panacea for tax and revenue.

Roel Dom, a research associated overseas development institute, a UK-based think tank, produced a study in 2017 entitled “Semi-Autonomous Revenue Authorities in Sub-Saharan Africa, Silver Bullet or White Elephant”. And, that study examined the performance of revenue authorities in 21 countries from 2008 to 2015 and states, contrary to earlier studies, our results failed to show any evidence of a systematic relationship between the presence of such and total tax revenue in these countries. When we include past revenue, the effect on revenue drops markedly and becomes insignificant, insignificant.

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

**Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:** So the research shows us, contrary to the Minister’s protestations, that the TTRA would not have been a quick fix to bring in more revenue. As I said, we will beef up the resources for the BIR and the Customs and Excise. With these words, Mr. Speaker, I now have a clock in front of me. It is so nice that I can check every time. I can see every time I am speaking that I may have a few minutes left. I just want to pay, again, tribute to the PSA and the other workers who supported this move, and I am very happy that the workers on the ground did not want this Act.

Our mandate at the polls, in keeping with the sentiment of workers, in alignment with our workers’ agenda, in fulfilment of our commitment to the PSA to resist the proliferation of contract jobs, we are very, very happy to bring this Bill to this House today, which we will pass tonight. I thank you very much, Sir.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for San Fernando East.

**Mr. Brian Manning** (*San Fernando East*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, let me begin by saying thank you to the people, the good people of San

Fernando East, for returning me as their representative in this venerable Chamber. It is my duty and firm responsibility, and one that I do not take lightly, to represent and to protect the people of that great constituency. That is something I will do with every fibre of my being.

This evening, Mr. Speaker, we have heard from the Prime Minister, the Minister of Finance, also the Member for La Brea, about the TTRA. But now we are going to hear the truth because that is not what we have been getting all evening from those on the other side. The TTRA is a simple, simple institution. In fact, it is best practice around the world for tax revenue enhancement. We have TTRAs across the planet. We even have TTRAs right here within the Caribbean region, Mr. Speaker. There is a revenue authority in Guyana, a revenue authority in Barbados, a revenue authority in Jamaica. Why? Because they wanted to improve on the existing system. Did the PNM undermine revenue collection in Guyana or Barbados or in Jamaica? Not so. So when persons come here today to say that the TTRA was there because of the system that was being undermined by the PNM, that is a bold-faced untruth by those on the other side, Mr. Speaker. And they know it. They know it.

What they would not tell you, what they would not tell you, and what should scare everyone in this country, is that this Government has access to two sources of revenue, just two. One is royalties from the oil and gas sector and the second one is taxation; just two. But during the campaign trail, they made all of these ridiculous promises to the people of this country and not one time have they said where will the revenues come from to keep those promises. So they keep going around and around in circles. We heard a whole lot of bluster, a whole lot of noise and faint fury from the Minister of Finance, but it is all an attempt to distract from the reality of the economic situation that we are in.

The Member for La Brea spoke about deficit budgets, about deficit budgets 2016/2017. Let me give the Member an economic lesson. We have been running deficit budgets in this country since the financial crisis of 2008. Since 2009, almost every year, there has been a deficit budget in this country. In 2014, with the advent of shale oil drilling, there was a huge collapse in oil and gas revenues in this country, Mr. Speaker. But in that time, 2014/2015, those on the other side foisted two of the largest budgets in the history of Trinidad and Tobago on the people of this country. And you know how they did it, Mr. Speaker? By burying the future generation of this country up to their eyeballs in debt. That is what they did. We have been digging ourselves out from that debt that they accumulated from that time ever since. And then also 2020, we got hit with the COVID crisis.

But let me tell you something about the TTRA and the truth of the matter. We heard the Minister of Finance said it was unconstitutional. The Member for La Brea said it was a PNM party group. Let me tell you what the Privy Council has said. And the Prime Minister gave us piecemeal information from the Privy Council judgment. Let me give you the whole truth. This is from the Privy Council, Mr. Speaker.

The TTRA was designed with safeguards to protect the rights of public servants, Mr. Speaker. The Privy Council, in its ruling in Privy Council Appeal No. 0051 of 2024, just last year, *Terrisa Dhoray v the Attorney General and the TTRA* affirmed the constitutionality of the TTRA, acknowledging that the enforcement provisions did not grant the Finance Minister or the TTRA Board undue power over public officers.

That is what the Privy Council has said, not the PNM, not me, not the former Minister of Finance. It was the Privy Council, Mr. Speaker. We know how those on the other side love to run to the courts for everything. That is what the Privy

Council said to them and to the people of this country. Mr. Speaker, the Privy Council's ruling affirmed the constitutionality of the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, the TTRA Act, stating that it does not violate the Constitution's mandates regarding taxation and the proper handling of collective funds.

Further, Mr. Speaker, the court addressed and dismissed a challenge positing that the Act undermined the authority of the Public Service Commission over public officers and permitted non-public officers to conduct governmental functions. However, I reiterate, Mr. Speaker, that such claims were dismissed. So all this talk about the Minister going to pick people to work at the TTRA, that it would be a PNM party group, the Minister of Finance said it was unconstitutional, the Prime Minister said it was constitutional, this is not the first time the Prime Minister has had to contradict the Minister of Finance. He seems to enjoy putting his foot in his mouth when it comes to economic matters, Mr. Speaker. I am still waiting on my property tax repayment that he promised the entire country, but I am sure we will be waiting for some time for that.

The Privy Council clarified that the Constitution does not require tax assessment and collection to be exclusively performed by government employees. This is the Privy Council, Mr. Speaker. It supported the TTRA's establishment as a body corporate charged with these responsibilities, noting that its independence and the implementation of safeguards against political interference align with constitutional principles, Mr. Speaker. Not me, not the PNM, this is the Privy Council. Mr. Speaker, this Government here is going to have a very short honeymoon in office, Mr. Speaker. Because very soon, especially members of the trade union movement in this country, are going to realize that they have been deceived by this coalition of confusion, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** That is what they have been doing. They have been deceiving the people of this country with false, empty promises. And the trade union movement is going to realize that very, very soon.

I can tell you one thing. The decision made this evening to repeal this Act is almost certainly going to lead to an investment or credit rating downgrade of this country by the international rating agencies, almost certainly. Let me remind you all, when the PNM left office here in April, Trinidad and Tobago was one of the few countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that had an investment grade rating. We are in fact the only country in the Caribbean with an investment grade rating. We are the only one. We are a level above speculative at this point. And this removal of the TTRA and closing that tax gap of \$10 billion annually is almost certainly going to push us over the edge into junk status, almost certainly, Mr. Speaker.

And, for those who do not understand what that means, and maybe the Minister of Finance does not get it, the downgrade is going to lead to an increase in every single interest rate in this country, all. Any loans, mortgages, car purchases, you are going to see an increase. Also, for business people who have to take loans to conduct their business, who have to buy on credit, it is also going to increase those interest rates. And that is going to increase the cost of living across the board in this country. This Government is shooting itself in the foot. They made all of these incredible, ridiculous promises that they simply cannot keep. And then at the same time, they are going to eliminate all of the sources of additional revenue that they could collect to possibly try to keep some of those promises. The tax gap in this country, as we have heard earlier, Mr. Speaker, is approximately \$10 billion annually. That is no small amount.

**11.30 p.m.**

Let me tell you what the Government is really trying to protect, and hide from. What the TTRA does, it democratizes tax collection in this country. In other words, it ensures that everyone pays their fair share. There are many people in this country who are not paying taxes, but employees like you and me who receive our cheques every month from the Parliament, we do not have the ability to avoid taxes. Public servants do not have the ability to avoid taxes. When you get your cheque at the end of the month the tax is already taken out. You cannot avoid taxes. So, who is avoiding taxes in this country?

**Hon. Member:** You.

**Mr. B. Manning:** The poor in this country, they do not pay taxes because successive PNM Governments have ensured that anyone making less than \$5,000 monthly pay zero in income tax in this country.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** That is to protect the poor, and then in the last budget the Minister of Finance and we all, proudly ensured that anyone making \$7,500 or less in this country, paid absolutely zero in income taxes.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** So, the poor is not paying taxes, right. So, who is paying taxes? What we have currently, Mr. Speaker, and what the TTRA is supposed to fix, is a lop-sided unjust system where a handful of people are carrying a disproportionate amount of the tax burden in this country, while the family, friends, and financiers of those on the other side do not pay. Right. Who can avoid taxes? It is wealthy business people, wealthy professionals with their own practices. All of us here would have had the experience of going to an office for some service with a professional, and they only want to be paid in cash. How many people here have

had that experience? Everyone here. You cannot use LINX, they will not take a cheque. Why is that? Because they are not paying any taxes, Mr. Speaker. That is why. We have all had that experience.

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. B. Manning:** Even Barataria/San Juan has had that experience, I am sure. Where you could go to any office—

**Mr. Marcelle:** [*Laughter*]

**Hon. Member:**—a serious matter.

**Mr. B. Manning:** It was not you?

**Mr. Hosein:** 48(4) and 48(6). That is a serious matter. You are imputing improper motives.

**Mr. B. Manning:** You have never been to an office—?

**Mr. Hosein:** Listen, let me tell you something, right. “I doh have no” friends with—

**Mr. Speaker:** Alright. Okay. Make your objection.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** San Fernando East, if it is you were imputing that the Member for Barataria/San Juan has participated in that, I will suggest you withdraw it.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, that is certainly not what I said.

**Mr. Speaker:** Unless you put it on the record—hang on.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Sorry.

**Mr. Speaker:** Unless you put on the record that you are in no way making any such imputation, at all, in those circumstances. Please.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, I have put that precisely as you said, on the record. What I have said is that all of us would have had the experience of going

to a professional's office, and having to pay cash because they would not accept anything else.

**Mr. Hosein:** Mr. Speaker, he has to withdraw that statement. He has not withdrawn the statement.

**Mr. Speaker:** San Fernando East, Member, please withdraw it. Thank you.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, I withdraw. Okay.

**Mr. Speaker:** Thank you.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Many of us, maybe not the Member for Barataria/San Juan, have been to the office of professionals in this country where they were unwilling to accept anything but cash. Everybody here has had—sorry, except for Barataria/San Juan, of course. Almost everyone has had that experience. Okay. That is because they are not paying taxes. We have a \$10 billion tax gap in this country. That is not public servants, that is not average employees in this country. We cannot escape that tax net. What they are doing is trying to protect their wealthy business friends, and other persons from paying taxes. That is what they are doing.

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

**Mr. Padarath:** Mr. Speaker, 48(4) and 48(6). Please. He has to withdraw and apologize.

**Mr. Speaker:** I agree with that.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, I have heard far worse from the other side this evening, in terms of accusations. Far worse. So, I am stunned by the outcry at this point.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** San Fernando East, I think where you offended is in imputing a motive as a reason. So, please remove the offending part, withdraw it, and let us

simply move on.

**Mr. B. Manning:** I withdraw it. What I am saying, Mr. Speaker, is that what they are doing here either intentionally or inadvertently, is protecting wealthy tax dodgers in this country, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Marcelle:** Exactly.

**Mr. B. Manning:** At the expense of hard working public servants, and other employees in this country who do not have the ability to dodge taxes. With a \$10 billion annual tax gap, even if the Government were able to accumulate a portion of that, it would, over time allow Government, or whoever is in office to actually reduce the tax burden for people across the board in this county, because everyone will be paying their fair share, Mr. Speaker that is the point of the TTRA to democratize tax collection in this country. Well, they are also not saying, and I am not talking about, is that it also reduces the ability for some nefarious persons in this economy to engage in money laundering, because now there is a sharing of information between customs and the Inland Revenue Division.

So, it is going to be far more difficult to cheat on invoices, far more difficult for you to overpay for properties and so on, because there will be a connection between these agencies that are able to see where money laundering is taking place. Not a single person on the other side has mentioned that, Mr. Speaker, for good reason, they know why. This is the party of SIS, no less. So, the Lord knows they do not want anything better.

**Mr. Morris:** Mr. Speaker, 48(6). He said that “they know why”, and that is imputing improper motives on us. Please have him withdraw.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Absolutely not.

**Mr. Speaker:** No reason to go down that road, on this platform, and to name companies as being implicitly involved in something, used in the same phrase as

money laundering. Withdraw please. Let us maintain the dignity.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, I withdraw.

**Mr. Speaker:** There is no good reason to do that. I want to make it clear, I am not going to allow parliamentary privilege to be used as a platform and an open licence for deprecation and defamation. Please, whether by implication or direct.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** Understood, Mr. Speaker, and I withdraw. I could have sworn that I heard far more offensive statements earlier but clearly I was wrong. But let me move on, Mr. Speaker, let me continue to educate and inform the people of this country. As I said, Government only has two forms of revenue, oil and gas revenues which are impugned because of the lower energy prices internationally. This country has no control over international energy prices, none, we are price takers. So, if that is impugned there is little we could do about it.

Secondly, it is taxes, we have already gone on record, no TTRA, no property tax, no online tax, no tax for this, no tax for that, so where, as everyone has been asking from day one, and I am sure the IMF is going to ask in their Article IV reviews. I am sure the credit rating agencies are going to ask when they come to gauge this economy, where will the revenues come from? Everyone has been asking. I heard the Prime Minister say in a press conference, “With the repeal of the TTRA, well, what we are going to do is expand the BIR”. Novel concept. But when they were in office in 2010 – 2015, nobody did it. It is not about expanding BIR, it is a broken system and we all accept that. The PNM did not undermine revenue collection in Guyana or Barbados or Jamaica or anywhere else in the world. The system is archaic and outdated, and cannot keep up with modern technology. The TTRA is meant to modernize the system, so that everyone pays their fair share. Those on the other side do not want that.

Let me continue to read from this Privy Council judgement, Mr. Speaker, so that the truth is on record, and not some of what we have heard on the other side:

The Privy Council clarified that the Constitution does not require tax assessment and collection to be exclusively performed by government employees.

**Mr. Speaker:**—just for the correction, are you reading from the judgement itself or a summary?

**Mr. B. Manning:** A summary, Sir.

**Mr. Speaker:** “Ah.” Well, just for the correction of the public record. Because you did say you were referring—

**Mr. B. Manning:** No problem.

Instead, it supported the TTRA establishment as a body corporate charged with these responsibilities noting that its independence and the implementation of safeguards against political interference aligned with constitutional principles.

Mr. Speaker:

This ruling is significant as it validates the legality of the TTRA which has been managing tax collection in Trinidad and Tobago since its inception. It is relevant for similar tax collection structures in other commonwealth countries.

Trinidad and Tobago is not the only one. Revenue authorities are not a PNM concept, in fact it is used all over the world, it was brought here, and was actually properly ventilated. It went to the JSC here. Many institutions, and some on the other side contributed to the Bill when it went to the JSC, and I have a list of many of those who would have contributed at the JSC. It received a healthy number of submissions for consideration from the following stakeholders:

- Inland Revenue Division;
- Customs and Excise Division;
- Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago;
- The FIU;
- Customs Clerks and Customs Brokers Association of Trinidad and Tobago;
- The Institute of Chartered Accountants;
- National Union of Government and Federated Workers;
- The Service Commissions Department;
- American Chamber of Commerce;
- Point Lisas Chamber of Commerce;
- Energy Chamber of Trinidad and Tobago;
- Tobago House of Assembly;
- The University of the West Indies;
- The Joint Trade Union Movement.

Mr. Speaker, all of these persons participated in the JSC that involved this piece of legislation. This is not some PNM machination, it is worldwide best practice, and it was ventilated properly through a subcommittee of this Parliament and also in the public domain. That is what was done.

Mr. Speaker, they want to repeal this Act today, but we also have not heard anything of what would be done in its place except already expand the broken system that we know is broken. So, it does not fix anything. Repealing this Act does not modernize our services, it does not improve data sharing between Customs and Inland Revenue which is the one thing that those on the other side do not want. It does not address compliance gaps or digitization needs, all it does is

remove a legislative tool that can still be adapted and improved to deliver results. They did not come here to try to bring amendments to the TTRA Bill. They want to repeal it completely, and give up a possible \$10 billion in additional annual revenues.

Mr. Speaker, as I said earlier, it is almost inevitable at this point with the removal of this TTRA, that this country is going to receive an international credit downgrade. After we receive a downgrade, after we have been the only country in this region with a positive investment grade rating, a devaluation cannot be far behind. It is almost inevitable, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Morris:** Mr. Speaker, I rise on 55(b). The Government has been here the whole day doing the people's business. The Member for San Fernando East continues to repeat what we have heard from Diego Martin North/East; it is repetition, it is the same thing over and over in his contribution. We have been here the whole day, Mr. Speaker, and it is the same points over and over.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Point of order.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mayaro, have a seat please. Have a seat please, Mayaro. Have a seat.

**Mr. Speaker:** I am on my legs.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Have a seat.

**Mr. Imbert:** Sit down—

**Mr. Speaker:** There has been some repetition but it does not meet the threshold of tedious repetition but Member we have heard about the downgrade so can we skip along a little bit. It is not tedious, it does not meet the threshold.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, unfortunately with a downgrade in credit rating from investment grade to speculative, it will be far more difficult for business

people to receive credit in this country. It is going to slow the economy. It is going to make things far more difficult, and as the former Minister of Finance said earlier, they are only hurting themselves, and sadly they are going to hurt the country in the process. What is going to lead to what they have done here today is unemployment in the public service. It will be almost inevitable because that is the first thing, as soon as you move from investment grade to speculative you are going to have to end up going to the IMF for funding, and they are going to demand a devaluation and also a reduction of employment in the public service. That is inevitable. And those on the other side could talk whatever they want, they know that is the truth.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** It is the truth. They will do, and say anything to avoid trying to tell the people of this country where will the revenues come from. I saw the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries on television, and I saw the Prime Minister saying, “Well, we will get oil and gas from Guyana”. Guyana came out the next day and said, “Yuh not getting our oil and gas”.

**Hon. Member:** Nope.

**Mr. B. Manning:** “Yuh not getting it.” “Well, we will build a pipeline to Suriname”. Suriname said, “Yuh not getting our oil and gas”. “We need it for ourselves.” Then they totally lost the plot, I heard we are getting oil and gas from Grenada. The Grenadians say they do not know what this Government is talking about. They were as surprised as I was. Because I had never heard that before. Right. That is the level of desperation. So, in other words, Mr. Speaker, they have no source of additional funding. The one source they had of significant additional funding in the short or medium term was the TTRA, and without that, they are going to have no choice but to either load up this country on an unreasonable and

inordinate amount of debt or dig deep into the HSF.

**11.45 p.m.**

Those are the only two ready sources of funding that this Government will find. So it is going to be extremely difficult. And they could talk right now, Mr. Speaker. In a few months, everyone in this country is going to know that they have been deceived—

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

**Mr. B. Manning:**—especially the members of the trade union movement. They cannot give the trade union movement or the public service in this country a 10 per cent salary increase without mortgaging the future of our children in this country. It is not possible. They know it. But on the campaign trail, they said whatever they had to say, they talked to the trade union. Mr. Speaker, nobody in this country thinks that this coalition of confusion and deception is going to last.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** And I predict that the trade union movement members will be the first ones to go.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** The first ones. Because they are the ones who will see, first of all, that they have been deceived from day one. They are going to start negotiations at 10. That means, they are coming down from 10 to eight, 10 to seven. It cannot be that they are going up, because they cannot even afford 10 right now. You cannot incur billions of dollars in expenses, have no additional revenues, and think that everything is going to be okay. The credit rating agencies are not stupid. The IMF is not stupid. The people of this country are not stupid. It is going to be a short honeymoon for those on the other side. Enjoy it while it lasts because it is not going to last long, Mr. Speaker.

I move on. Let me say—let me let the people of this country know some of the real benefits of a TTRA, the possible benefits of a revenue authority. And this is a modernization of revenue collection to ensure, as I have said before, that everyone pays their fair share so that their money laundering friends will not escape from the net of the TTRA.

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Hosein:** Mr. Speaker—

**Mr. B. Manning:** Was that offensive? I apologize, okay.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, I have spoken to you about that before.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, I withdraw.

Here are some of the benefits:

“Public revenue enhancement reflected in higher tax ratios and real revenue growth”.

That is a benefit.

“Greater efficiency in public resource utilization via financial and administrative independence...”—and—“...managerial autonomy”.

Managerial autonomy, Mr. Speaker, not a PNM party group, as we heard earlier.

“Employment of a competent, disciplined, and more qualified staff via the freedom to offer higher compensation than the civil service and the freedom to recruit and fire on own terms”.

Mr. Speaker, that is for better efficiency and performance.

“De-politicization of tax administration”.

**Mr. Hosein:** Mr. Speaker, I humbly rise on 44(10). I believe the Member is now reading. I do not know if he sought leave to read his contribution.

**Mr. B. Manning:** I am quoting.

**Mr. Hosein:** Who is he quoting from? What you are quoting from?

**Mr. B. Manning:** I am quoting.

**Mr. Speaker:** All right. A simple solution to this. If the Member is quoting from a document, he simply needs to refer to the source and give credit to the source. If that is—

**Hon. Member:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, can you indicate whether you are quoting from a document, the source of the document, if that is so?

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, sorry?

**Mr. Speaker:** If that is so? Are you indeed citing from a document?

**Mr. B. Manning:** From my notes, yes.

**Hon. Member:** [*Laughter*]

**Mr. Speaker:** From your notes?

**Mr. B. Manning:** From my notes which I got from a document, from research.

**Mr. Speaker:** Well, you cannot have it both ways, quite frankly.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, I am simply listing the benefits of the TTRA. It is generic.

**Mr. Speaker:** Hang on. You cannot have it both ways. If you are going to read from the document, you are going to have to give credit to the source.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Sure

**Mr. Speaker:** If not, you can summarize and use the document to an extent. So, let us move on.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, I am simply giving a list of the generic benefits of the TTRA. That is all. It is a simple list. Right? We sat here, we heard several Members on the other side read out their entire contributions and no one on this side said a word. I am simply quoting a list.

Mr. Speaker, we have:

“Improved taxpayer services and reduced taxpayer compliance costs”. That is also a benefit of the TTRA. It is easier and simpler for the people of this country to pay their taxes with a TTRA than the system that they have right now, Mr. Speaker. Better efficiency, better for all. That is how everyone ends up paying their fair share. When everyone pays their fair share, we all pay less. They will not tell the people of this country that.

“Better work ethic...modification of administrative culture...

Comprehensive accounting for all tax revenues

Integration of tax and taxpayer-related databases”

Mr. Speaker, that last one, I will get to that very soon.

Let me move on. As I said earlier, speaking about—

**Mr. Speaker:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. B. Manning:** Sorry?

**Mr. Speaker:** You have one more minute of regular time, unless you wish to avail yourself of that.

**Mr. B. Manning:** I will avail myself, Sir.

**Mr. Speaker:** You may, thank you.

**Mr. B. Manning:** Thank you so much. Mr. Speaker, I am talking about here now data sharing between Customs and Inland Revenue. Now that, Mr. Speaker, is the major and integral part of the TTRA that helps to dispense with money laundering and other corrupt practices in this country. As I said earlier, Mr. Speaker, it is not the working class people of this country or employees, general employees, that can dodge taxes. The taxes are removed from your cheque before you even receive it. It is wealthy business people. It is wealthy professionals in their practices that are dodging taxes in this country. And that is where the corrupt practices are taking place. It is not the union membership. It is not any public service. It is not in other

unions across the country. It is wealthy professionals and business people that are doing it. Those on the other side, by removing the TTRA, are allowing this practice to continue, whether intentionally or inadvertently. That is just a fact. There is no denying that.

Revenue authorities monitor tax evasion, customs fraud and illicit financial flows, which are common methods of money laundering in this country, Mr. Speaker. There are several common money laundering methods. We have trade-based money laundering, Mr. Speaker, manipulating invoices and customs declarations to disguise illicit funds. That will be dramatically reduced by a modernized, digitized TTRA. Real estate transactions using property purchases to integrate laundering money into the economy also can be detected by a modernized TTRA. Cash smuggling and tax fraud, moving large sums of money across borders, or under-reporting income to evade detection, Mr. Speaker, all of those things can be detected by a well-manned and modern revenue authority. It has been done here—well, sorry, we tried to do it here in Trinidad and Tobago. It was done around the world. It was even done within the region. Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, they have all done it. Why not in Trinidad and Tobago?

This Government has never tried to undermine the trade unions or public service of this country. We depend on them to ensure that work is done in this place. I mean, the Opposition, Mr. Speaker, when the PNM was in government, never so. Everything we have done in the previous years, in the previous Government, was to ensure that we protected the rights of workers in this country, and also protected the poor and vulnerable of Trinidad and Tobago. We are the ones that ensured that the poor persons of this country did not have to pay income taxes; did not.

I want to remind the Members on the other side, with those two sources of

revenues that we have, oil and gas royalties and taxation, we have a massive burden, in terms of transfers and subsidies in this country that need to be covered. Some years, transfers and subsidies can make up even half of our annual budget. Some years \$25 billion, \$30 billion in transfers and subsidies. And then there are salaries and pensions, which is another several billion dollars in expenses. So the Government right now is faced with a lot of fixed expenses, Mr. Speaker, and they have no idea how they are going to pay for it. Already, I have seen the Minister of Finance, or the Minister in the Ministry of Finance talking about borrowing billions of dollars from international lending agencies, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, that is the only language they seem to know. They do not know about earning or diversifying.

Under the previous PNM Government, the energy sector, for the first time in a long time, outstripped the energy sector in this country, and that is because the previous PNM Government implemented several programmes to benefit small and medium enterprises in Trinidad and Tobago, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Mr. B. Manning:** That is what real diversification looks like, not lip service, not buzzwords, not catchphrases, as you heard from the other side. That is all you are going to get because they have nothing else. All you are going to hear from them in months to come is debt, debt, debt, because that is all that they know. Borrowing, borrowing, borrowing. And eventually, Mr. Speaker, you cannot borrow forever. We have been running deficit budgets every year since 2009. We have to borrow money to pay our expenses since then. At some point, you are going to have to start paying the piper and sadly, that is going to happen very soon under this Government because of their mismanagement and callous handling of our economy, and the deceptive, invalid promises that they made to the people of

this country in a desperate attempt to win a general election.

Mr. Speaker, I warn those on the other side and the people of this country that if they continue down this path and they do not implement this TTRA, it is almost certain that we are going to endure extremely harsh economic times in the coming years. Mr. Speaker, I thank you.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Member for Barataria/San Juan.

**The Minister of Legal Affairs and Minister in the Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries (Hon. Saddam Hosein):** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, on that side of the Chamber, the last person sat on that seat was a fella delusional. And it seems now San Fernando East is also suffering from delusion. He is “delulu”. After that speech, he is “delulu”. Mr. Speaker, the Member is delusional. The Member said that the PNM took care of the working class. He said that the PNM helped small and medium-sized businesses. Under the last 10 years, they closed down most of the small and medium-sized businesses.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** Mr. Speaker, what about the 8,000 workers they fired from Petrotrin? And the Member has the gall, the temerity, to come into this Chamber to say that they stand on the side of workers? He has no moral authority to speak on behalf of workers in this country. It is often said, Mr. Speaker, that “dog eat yuh shame”, and it looks like “ah pit bull eat he shame tonight”.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** Mr. Speaker, the Member said that in the period 2010 to 2015, we had two of the largest budgets.

**Mr. Manning:** The two largest.

**Hon. S. Hosein:** We were able to build schools.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** We built hospitals. We built police stations. We built box drains, and we are proud to build box drains because it helped with the flooding.

Mr. Speaker, Mr. Speaker, through callousness, spite, ill will, they closed the Couva Children's Hospital for 10 years. Not a child was able to access health care in that facility, and has the temerity to come today to contribute on the Children's Life Fund and now on this Bill with respect to the TTRA. We will have our way tonight and that Bill will be repealed.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** Campaign promise made, campaign promise delivered.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** Under the astute leadership of the Member for Siparia, the hon. Prime Minister—and I want to repeat it. In the last few months, while we sat on that side of the Chamber, they said, “Leave Siparia right there.” All of them told us, “Leave Siparia right there.” We took their advice and we left Siparia right there, and that is why they are in Opposition today.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** And we will keep Siparia right there. We will keep her right there. You see, the Member has no moral authority because “dog eat he shame”, Mr. Speaker, dog eat his shame, because none of us on this side has “ah mamu” called Calder Hart.

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

**Hon. Member:** “Ah uncle” called Malcolm Jones.

**Hon. S. Hosein:** “Ah uncle” called Malcolm Jones. None of us has that uncle on this side.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** No, none of us.

**Mr. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, 48(6), please. Thank you so much.

**Mr. Speaker:** All right. Let me rule. Member, I do not think that was an imputation. He did not associate anyone on this side with the names which he referred to.

**Mr. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, I have no uncle named Calder Hart or Malcolm Jones.

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. Speaker:** I do not think it was said to you.

**Mr. Manning:** And I am not sure what you are saying.

**Mr. Speaker:** No, no, no, no, no.

**Mr. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, I was reprimanded for less, earlier.

**Mr. Speaker:** No, no, no, hang on a second. Quiet, please. The exact words of the Member were, "No one on this side has" and he repeated what he repeated. There was no imputation, either to you directly, indirectly or otherwise, or anyone on this side. So there is no relevance to 48(6).

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

**12.00 a.m.**

**Hon S. Hosein:** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** And Mr. Speaker, I can proudly say none of us on this side built basketball courts.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** None of us. But they come with their same doom and gloom narrative that the economy will crash and that we will devalue the dollar. That was

the same thing the country voted you out on. You campaigned on this nonsense—

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

**Hon S. Hosein:**—and they voted you all out. I mean, come here with an ounce of shame at least. In fact, all of the Opposition could fit in a red-band maxi.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** And they come here now to talk about what we should do and what we should not do. You did not have the ideas, the plans or the policies for the last 10 years and want to tell us what to do? Mr. Speaker, we have the mandate of the people to govern this country and we will govern this country.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** We have the mandate. Because the Member harped, and most of his contribution was where we will get this money from. Let me tell you where we will get the money from, Mr. Speaker. We will not have \$23 million in rental given to a Cabinet Minister on this side.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** We will not have \$3 million spent on paintings.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** Half a million dollars on Soca on the Seas.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** A \$2 million Benz.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** A phone call to Mr. Trump for \$16 million.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** A Tarouba stadium that costs \$130 million.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** A toilet paper factory loan for \$30 million. “Doh forget dat.”

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** “We never geh it back.” And I think my friend is probably roaming in Tobago right now for a bill for \$69,000.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** We will not have that on this side. Because, Mr. Speaker, when we went to the electorate, we went to them with a plan, a clear policy of how we are going to govern this country under the hon. Prime Minister. We told them—it is no secret—that once we get into Government, one of the first acts would be to repeal the TTRA. In fact, Mr. Speaker, on our first Cabinet meeting, Cabinet Note No. 2 was the approval to repeal the TTRA Act and other matters.

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

**Hon S. Hosein:** Promise made, promise kept, promise delivered. Mr. Speaker, the Cabinet was informed what was taking place with this TTRA. This TTRA was only because a select few of them agreed to this, you know. When you look at the options that the workers were exercising—we have the figures in front of us.

Mr. Speaker, they had several options. They could voluntarily retire from the public service on terms and conditions agreed with him and the appropriate recognized association and the CPO. Twenty-eight public servants exercised that option. Four hundred and fourteen exercised the option to transfer to the authority with the approval of the appropriate service commission. One hundred and eighty-one public officers selected section 18(2)(c), which is to be appointed on transfer by the PSC to a suitable office in the Enforcement Division. Two hundred and forty eight decided to remain in the public service, and an additional 397 public officers did not select any options, thereby remaining under the Ministry of Finance. So the workers, it was clear, did not want this TTRA and we listened.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** We listened. Only 32.6 per cent of the public officers ever expressed any interest in transferring to the TTRA. So how could you come to this Parliament and say that if we do not have this TTRA, the economy would fall down? In fact, we never had the TTRA and the economy did not fall down. We also said on this side that if the TTRA is not our option—because this is not a new invention. These discussions started during Mr. Manning’s period, during his time of government—not this member for San Fernando East. Mr. Patrick Manning and his “mamu”. Mr. Speaker, the issue that we are having right now is this; okay, TTRA is gone but we have always said on the Opposition that we will strengthen the institutional capacity of the Board of Inland Revenue.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** Do you know why they did not want to do that? Because it is difficult for any ministerial intervention and political interference with the current structure of the BIR so what they had to do was destroy it. Mash it up. Create something that they could have their grubby hands in. That is what they tried to do. But today, Mr. Speaker, the people have spoken and have given us the mandate to remove their hands from tax collection.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** Remove their hands from political interference in tax information. They have tried as much as they can, but the people of Trinidad and Tobago voted clearly and stopped them on the 28<sup>th</sup> of April dead in their tracks. And when they talk about this \$10 billion tax gap, Mr. Speaker, you would be surprised. When we sat in the Cabinet we were shocked, but not surprised, to learn that they have bankrupted Trinidad and Tobago through their callous policies.

Mr. Speaker, they like to talk about—the Member for Diego Martin North/East, that when he became the Minister in 2015, we maxed out the overdraft

and they would get fumes and so on. Mr. Speaker, when we went there it did not even have fumes. They have maxed out the overdraft. They have done everything that they can, Mr. Speaker. I do not want to use the word “loot”, but they have done everything they can to destroy the economy. I do not know if it was deliberate. I cannot say that, but we on this side accept the challenge that we will fix Trinidad and Tobago and we will have an economy up and running.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** And, Mr. Speaker, our message on this side was extremely consistent. October 2019, the then-leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, stated in her budget response that if elected to government, the UNC would scrap the TTRA.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** November 2021, during the parliamentary debate on the TTRA Bill, the Opposition leader then strongly opposed it, calling it unconstitutional.

“...a dagger in the heart of the Constitution...”

—and an attack on the Constitution. The Opposition leader then highlighted concerns about political interference, lack of security for tenure for workers, and the potential misuse of private data, suggesting that resources should instead be given to the existing BIR and Customs and Excise. And this was in 2021. We have always been consistent.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** The Opposition Leader, now Prime Minister, has been very consistent with this policy with respect to the TTRA, Mr. Speaker. That is what we have done. And, Mr. Speaker, this Government will do all that we can. We will make all the right decisions to ensure that we take care of every citizen of this country.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** Because what we did, Mr. Speaker, is that we promised that when the UNC wins, everybody wins.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** When the UNC wins, Mr. Speaker, everybody wins. That is how we intend to govern in the next five years, and we will be governing for the next five years, and the next five years after that, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. S. Hosein:** So, on behalf of the good people of Barataria/San Juan, Mr. Speaker, I want to thank the hon. Prime Minister for bringing this Bill so swiftly because there are constituents who were forced, and threatened, in order to lose their jobs because of this TTRA. I want to thank the hon Prime Minister and the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago for protecting those workers, in particular my constituents in Barataria/San Juan. So I thank you very much, Mr. Speaker, for this very short intervention.

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

**Mr. Tancoo:** Thank you very much.

**Mr. Speaker:** No.

**Mr. Tancoo:** Sorry.

**Mr. Speaker:** The Member for Malabar/Mausica.

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

**Mr. Dominic Romain** (*Malabar/Mausica*): Thank you, Mr. Speaker, for—

[*Mr. Tancoo gestures to Mr. Speaker*]

**Mr. Speaker:** No, no, no. He waved before.

**Mr. D. Romain:**—the opportunity to contribute to this debate—

**Mr. Speaker:** No, no. He did wave before.

**Mr. D. Romain:**—and permit me to begin, Mr. Speaker, by thanking the constituents of the constituency of Malabar/Mausica—

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

**Mr. D. Romain:**—7,690 of them who would have cast their ballot for me as the standard-bearer for the People's National Movement. And that constituency has remained faithful to the People's National Movement, despite the efforts of the other side to capture that seat. In fact, on election night, while we had counted our votes and we knew that we had won, the other side had been on social media claiming that they had secured the seat. But suffice it to say.

Mr. Speaker, permit me just to respond to a couple of representations made by the Minister of Finance, the Member for Fyzabad, where the Member would have indicated or suggested that the last administration was only about tax, tax, tax. And that is a narrative that they have been pushing for the last 10 years; that the former PNM administration was only about tax, tax, tax, and cut, cut, cut. But, Mr. Speaker, one of the more consequential policies that was implemented by the last PNM administration were three increases in personal allowance, and the significance of that, Mr. Speaker, I think has been significantly underrated.

Because, you see, Mr. Speaker, while there are persons who will argue that they are still on 2013 salaries, the quantum of that salary or the percentage of that salary that they take home is greater today than it was in 2015. Mr. Speaker, let me give the example. Somebody who was working—let us say, a public servant who was working for \$7,500 in 2015, would have been paying \$7,500 a year in income tax, Mr. Speaker. So, you were working for 12 months but only getting paid for 11. So one month was gratis. [*Interruption*]

Mr. Speaker, please, if the Member for La Brea would allow me. Mr. Speaker, with the three increases in personal allowance, that person, that

individual, no longer pays income taxes. So that is an additional \$7,500 in disposable income that now goes to that household. If you have two persons living in that household who earn \$7,500 or more, that is an additional \$15,000 in disposable income that would have gone to that home. That works out to \$625 per month that was previously going to the Board of Inland Revenue, and is now going to their bank account. That \$625 represents an increase in take-home pay of about 8.3 per cent, Mr. Speaker.

So when we talk about the 4 per cent and the Government only paid 4 per cent, persons did not pay mind to that particular measure; those three increases, that would have increased the amount that these persons are taking home. And, that was a pay raise not just for public servants, but for all of Trinidad and Tobago. Because it was not just the public sector, the private sector as well would have benefited from that. Mr. Speaker, the Member for Barataria/San Juan mentioned that they built hospitals—plural. They built one hospital, the famed Couva Children's Hospital. The other five were built by the People's National Movement, despite the representation.

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** The sod for the Arima Hospital was turned on the 7<sup>th</sup> of May 2015, four months before the general election. So, unless the Arima Hospital is a prefab hospital, or it was built for ants, Mr. Speaker, they did not build it.

**Mr. Morris:** Mr. Speaker, 48(1), relevance. This is to debate the TTRA.

**Mr. D. Romain:** I am responding to what the—

**Mr. Morris:** He has made his point on the hospitals, but he cannot go at length to discuss the hospitals and prefab. He cannot go so far, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Speaker:** Let us have a measure of proportionality. I will allow the Member to proceed, but briefly. Proceed.

**Mr. D. Romain:** Mr. Speaker, I was just responding to something that was said by the Member for Barataria/San Juan. The Member for Barataria/San Juan also spoke about a \$30 million loan that was given to the toilet paper factory. Mr. Speaker, that is not correct. What the paper factory, GrandBay paper, would have received was a US \$5 million loan guarantee through the Exim Bank.

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** And if one would look, Mr. Speaker, there is a difference between a guarantee and a loan. The Government provided a guarantee. That same business, that same company, Mr. Speaker, within the space of one year, was able to secure a \$1 million contract in Cuba. So when the Member said that the Government gave a loan for \$30 million and it was not paid back and so on, that is not true, Mr. Speaker. So I just wanted to put that on the record.

**12.15 a.m.**

Mr. Speaker, since 2008 the Revenue Authority has been in the lexicon of the public of Trinidad and Tobago, since 2008, and as the Member for Fyzabad would have mentioned, as he said earlier during his contribution, the population voted against that in 2010 and then he said they voted against it again in 2025. So he acknowledges, Mr. Speaker, that the issues, the deficiencies that would have given rise to the Revenue Authority would have existed prior to 2010, that is why the then PNM Administration would have seen the need to put this institution into place. But, Mr. Speaker, the same prescriptions that they are now offering and telling us would fix the issues in the Board of Inland Revenue and fix the issues in Customs such that there is no need for us to have a revenue authority, those same prescriptions would have been offered in 2010 when they came in. Between 2010 to 2015, what was done to correct or to fix these deficiencies?

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** Mr. Speaker, I sat on a post budget panel in the studios of i95, with one, David Abdulah, trade unionist, known by the Member for La Brea. And Mr. Abdulah would have made a statement that he has repeated ad nauseam in several forums, Mr. Speaker, which was that he had a conversation with a former People's Partnership Minister of Finance, and the topic of that discussion was the issue of tax leakages, which we are treating with today. And Mr. Abdulah is on record as having said that this former People's Partnership Minister, indicated to him—

**Mr. Tancoo:** Member, hold on, hold on, hold on.

**Mr. D. Romain:**—that the estimated annual leakages—

**Mr. Tancoo:** He has to take ownership of the comments you are making here, eh.

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

**Mr. Tancoo:** Take ownership, eh.

**Hon. Member:** Where is the Opposition Leader?

**Mr. D. Romain:** Mr. Speaker—

**Hon. Member:** [*Interruption*]

**Mr. D. Romain:** Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Speaker:** Please allow the Member to continue.

**Mr. D. Romain:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Abdulah would have indicated, Mr. Speaker, that the former People's Partnership Administration's Finance Minister would have told them that the estimated annual leakages—

**Mr. Morris:** Mr. Speaker, Mr. Abdulah, nor the third person who we do not know is not in this House—

**Hon Members:** [*Crosstalk*]

**Mr. Morris:**—he cannot be put on the *Hansard*, that cannot be put on the *Hansard*. You cannot reference somebody who we do not know, Mr. Speaker.

**Mr. Speaker:** I think—Members, come on, the gratuitous hurling of insults across the corridors at each other is counterproductive. Members know, if you are taking an objection on a point of order, you need to raise a Standing Order. Simply rising and articulating an objection does not meet the criteria. So, can I ask you all to refrain from it? It is 12.18 a.m., let us get on with it, shall we?

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** Mr. Speaker, as I was saying, I sat in the studio with Mr. Abdullah, right, and he made the statement that this former People's Partnership Minister of Finance would have indicated to him that the estimated tax leakage at that time was \$7 billion, Mr. Speaker, \$7 billion, and it has now grown to 10, as we have heard today. So these leakages existed between 2010 to 2015, and if the prescriptions that the Minister of Finance is telling us would work today to fix the issues with the Board of Inland Revenue, why were those prescriptions not implemented between 2010 to 2015 because had it been done, Mr. Speaker, today, we would not be quoting figures of \$10 billion. If it is that these prescriptions are so great and could fix the problem so well, why did it not work then, perhaps the Member could tell us what was done between 2010 to 2015 to address the issue, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. D. Romain:** Yes, we are in 2025. We are in 2025, Mr. Speaker, and we are still dealing with the issue of these tax leakages.

Mr. Speaker, but what are some of the issues? What are some of the deficiencies that the Revenue Authority was seeking to address? With your permission, Mr. Speaker, I would just like to read briefly a press release that was put out by the Minister of Finance, then Member for Oropouche West, on the 31<sup>st</sup> of January of this year, entitled:

“Imbert’s tax amnesty extension continues to undermine the integrity of the taxation system!

The news today from the Ministry of Finance that Minister Imbert has extended the tax amnesty is an unfortunate confirmation that Minister Imbert continues to undermine the integrity of the taxation system. This latest action facilitates tax evaders, individuals and businesses that have failed to pay taxes on time.

This means the Minister is fully aware that there are still a substantial number of offenders who, despite the multiple amnesties and extensions already given, have refused to meet their obligations to the State. This extension of the amnesty sets the wrong precedent, that the Government is willing to turn a blind eye to law-breakers which is completely unacceptable. It is an open—”

**Mr. Hosein:** Mr. Speaker, I am so sorry to do this during the Member’s meeting contribution, 48(1), the tax amnesty has nothing to do with this Bill before us.

**Mr. Speaker:** No, no, no, in all fairness, I think the Member explained the rationale why he was referring, so let him—

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker:

“It is an open insult to civic minded persons and businesses who have diligently abided by the law and filed their tax returns and made their tax payments on time.

Imbert’s priority should be on creating new and sustainable revenue streams. Instead, he continues to facilitate delinquent businesses in a desperate act to scrape up any change he can. I challenge the Minister to provide a list of these delinquent businesses who are effectively defrauding the tax-paying

citizens of this country. Further, the Minister should advise the country of how much money is still outstanding/due, and while legal action has not been taken to pursue these law breakers.

It is unacceptable that tax-evaders continue to get a 'bligh' from this Government while average citizens are being threatened with legal action, fines and even seizure of their properties if they do not pay the PNM Property Tax."

Mr. Speaker, that press release did not age well at all. You know the saying "a few moments later", well, a few months later, the Member who issued this press statement is now in the hot seat. He is now the Minister of Finance, and he would have announced just recently that this very same tax amnesty that he was against, he extended it to August 2<sup>nd</sup>, Mr. Speaker.

So everything, all of these deficiencies that exist, the Minister quoted here is asking about legal action being taken against those lawbreakers. Has the Member taken action against these law-breakers Mr. Speaker? Has he indicated any intention to take action, legal action, against these lawbreakers, Mr. Speaker? Has he indicated, with all of these prescriptions that he has mentioned to us on how they plan to strengthen the Board of Inland Revenue, what is the timeline for that? We have not heard that.

**Mr. Hosein:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. D. Romain:** What was that? We have not heard that, we are still waiting for the timeline, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, 2025 is not 2010. We do not have the luxury of time to wait for the implementation of these prescriptions. Whereas, between 2010 to 2015 we have the boast from that side that they would have enjoyed the highest energy revenues of the country's history, Mr. Speaker. Highest energy revenues. So, they had a little time to play with. We see the

country's economic circumstance right now, Mr. Speaker, so we do not have the luxury. So, perhaps the Member could tell us when exactly these prescriptions are going to be implemented and what is the timeline we are looking at?

You know, Mr. Speaker, when I looked at the at the Order Paper and I saw that we would be debating this particular legislative measure, I was a bit confused, because when one looks at all of the legislative goodies that were promised to the population by the other side during the election campaign, legislation such as, stand your ground law, legislation to make it easier for law abiding citizens to be able to “load up the ’matic”, legislation, Mr. Speaker, all of these particular legislative measures that would have appealed to the voting public—

**Mr. Speaker:** You are running afoul of 49(1).

**Mr. D. Romain:** Mr. Speaker, I—

**Mr. Speaker:** 48(1), I think you are running afoul of 48(1) now, can I just advise you that, in my view, you are running afoul of 48(1).

**Mr. D. Romain:** I was making the point, Mr. Speaker, that this particular measure, the repeal of the Revenue Authority Act, Mr. Speaker, it is pretty low down on the totem pole in terms of its appeal to the electorate, but having listened to the Minister of Finance, we understand that this is really meant to be, Mr. Speaker, a consolation prize to the members of the PSA. Because for the last six weeks, we have heard about bus route passes, we have heard about who was benefiting from state housing, we have heard about ghost rentals, Mr. Speaker, but what we have not heard about is the 10 per cent that was promised. Have not heard that.

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** The only time we heard about it was when the question was posed the hon. Prime Minister as to a timeline, and she said, I cannot give you a

timeline, because if I tell you the 10<sup>th</sup> you are going to come and tell me today is the 11<sup>th</sup> and it has not been done, Mr. Speaker. So it is clear why it is this particular measure, the repeal, has now come up above all the other goodies that has been offered.

Mr. Speaker, the Member for Fyzabad spoke about broadening the tax base by establishing new businesses. That is good, but we have a lot of businesses in the country, Mr. Speaker, a lot of persons who are self-employed, who are not currently in the tax net. At every time an opportunity presents itself, Mr. Speaker, for discussion about bringing these persons into the tax net, it is made to seem as if that is something bad.

Over the last five years or so, Mr. Speaker, Members opposite have made the word “tax” almost anathema, Mr. Speaker. So, if you speak the word “tax” in a positive manner, you are likely to get stoned and that is the challenge that we have had to face. We know, all of us here have constituency offices. For some of us if it is not a government building, as far as I understand, the Parliament pays rent for these buildings, but we have landlords in this country, Mr. Speaker, who receive their rent every month. Some of them have multiple apartments, and they receive their rent in cash. How many of them, Mr. Speaker, fulfill their tax responsibility?

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. D. Romain:** How many of them Mr. Speaker, we know, and that is, that is again, one of the issues. When we talk about the doubles vendor, we talk about the bake and shark vendor and the possibility of bringing them into the tax net, we make it seem as if that is a bad thing, we are trying to oppress the people and tax people, tax, tax, tax, Mr. Speaker.

So when we want to talk about broadening the tax base by establishing new businesses—let us look at what currently exists. Because when I was

campaigning, Mr. Speaker, many times the Members of my campaign team would get upset with me for spending too much time with one constituent. And the thing about that, Mr. Speaker, is that more often than not, I would not pay them any mind, because these conversations, Mr. Speaker, were very elucidating. And the fact of the matter is, many times when you had these lengthy conversations with that constituent, it is not that they are talking about any personal needs, you know, they would talk about current affairs. They would talk about national issues such as, the Revenue Authority, such as the property tax. Persons would say to me, listen, I do not mind paying the tax, you know, but I just want to see value for money. I want to see where my money is going, Mr. Speaker.

So tax is not always bad, but we speak to the issue of the Revenue Authority, Mr. Speaker, and again, what it was supposed to treat with, what it was supposed to address. And why did we have to go down the road, the draconian road, Mr. Speaker, of full repeal. And again, permit me to quote, because there were other options. In 2009, then Sen. Wade Mark, Mr. Speaker, and I am quoting here from a *Newsday* article entitled:

“Row over VSEP Revenue Authority Bill.”

Right—and the article quotes then Sen. Mark stating:

“Although Mark criticized the Government for moving forward with plans to retrench workers when the legal basis for the TTRA is yet to even reach Parliament, he noted the Opposition would still support a TTRA, but in a modified form.”

**12.30 a.m.**

This is in 2009, a TTRA in a modified form, speaking on behalf of the Opposition, Sen. Mark is saying that they would still support it. So why were we not given the option of a modified form of the TTRA, Mr. Speaker, instead of a full repeal?

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** Was that even explored, Mr. Speaker? Was that even explored? Perhaps the Member for Fyzabad could tell us that, because the fact of the matter is all of the issues that they have raised with the Revenue Authority, they could have amended, Mr. Speaker. They could have made changes to it.

The same thing with the demerit system. The public is saying, “Doh geh rid of it in its entirety.” There are certain things that offend, so let us treat with that, fix it. Mr. Speaker, a lot of money has already been spent on this Revenue Authority, a lot of money, on its implementation, through litigation, because we know what would have happened with respect to the Minister being taken to court, and all of those issues, Mr. Speaker.

The Prime Minister spoke a lot about taxpayers’ money and how we need to protect taxpayers’ money. The taxpayers are not pleased that tonight we are going to repeal this Bill for which a lot of money has already been spent. How are we going to get that back, Mr. Speaker? How are we going to get it back? We are not. Does the other side care about all of that money that has been spent, Mr. Speaker, in their consideration and their decision to repeal the Revenue Authority? No, they have not.

So, Mr. Speaker, these are some of the concerns that I have as a citizen, that I have as a taxpayer with respect to this. As a finance professional, Mr. Speaker, I could tell you, I have clients who have said to me that they saw the Revenue Authority as being something progressive. It is an evolving entity. Nobody is saying that it is a panacea. Nobody is saying that it would solve all of the issues, but it was a starting point to take us to where we needed to be, Mr. Speaker, in terms of improving the ease of doing business.

Members opposite, when Government used to love to talk about that, our

ranking in terms of ease of doing business and the Global Competitiveness Index, they talk about how that has deteriorated under the past administration, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. Member:** True.

**Mr. D. Romain:** But this is one of the issues that I am expressing on behalf of some of my clients, Mr. Speaker. So we need to address that.

So we talked about strengthening the BIR and resourcing the BIR, but very little mention was made about the issue of the Customs. We saw the problems that we had with the scanners on the port. The Member for Diego Martin North/East would have told us about some of the challenges they have when the scanners are working, and then you have, magically, forklifts running into the scanners, and then they are non-functional for a while, and we know the challenges that that presents in terms of scanning containers.

I had recalled, Mr. Speaker, when the Customs Department came before—I believe it was the—I do not know if you call it, joint select committee, or some one of the committees of Parliament, and the Member for Oropouche East would have asked the Comptroller of Customs with respect to the procurement, whether or not you could not have just used—gone to the National Security Council and requested a sole select. I recalled the Comptroller of Customs saying, “No, Sir, we cannot do that. We have to follow the rules of procurement based on the Central Tenders Board.” This was before the implementation of the OPR.

So we defend proper procurement, but then we make the suggestion of sole select. So those are some of the issues again. So I am not hearing much about the Customs Department, Customs and Excise. I am hearing about the Board of Inland Revenue. We talk about, Mr. Speaker, leakages, but leakages do not only come from the non-payment of taxes. Mr. Speaker, the Prime Minister told us today

about some half a billion dollars that was spent on ghost rentals under the last administration, and let us say perchance that, “Okay, we doh have no reason to doubt that that amount to that quantum of money was in fact spent”, but, you know, property tax, Mr. Speaker, is one way that we could get back or capture some of that revenue, that money that was spent.

We are unable to get it—why?—because Members opposite are vehemently opposed to the property tax, but that is a form of leakage as well. Mr. Speaker, the point I am making with respect to that whole issue, 400, and almost \$500 million that would have been spent on rentals—so we are told, and the question must be asked as well, “Was the relevant taxes, the income taxes, the corporate taxes that should have been paid on these rentals, were they paid?” We do not know. Again, these are some of the issues and some of the challenges that we need to address. But what I am hearing from the Member for Fyzabad in terms of what they are proposing to be able to treat with these issues, Mr. Speaker, it just does not gel.

The Member for Couva South—is it?—said, “Judge them by what they do, not what they say.” That is a good point. I like that quote. So let us look, Mr. Speaker, what has been the track record of Members opposite when it comes to legislation that is supposed to treat with the issue of tax efficiency. We know what happened in 2016 with the FATCA Bill. They were opposed to the FATCA Bill on the basis of the reciprocity clause, which, Mr. Speaker, would have given local tax authorities the wherewithal to be able to access information on a reciprocal basis from their US counterparts, with respect to locals, who have assets in the United States and who may be of interest to the tax authorities.

They were vehemently opposed to that, Mr. Speaker, until civil society, until citizens as a whole started to clamour, because of what the potential outcome could have been if we did not pass that legislation, and eventually they capitulated and

they supported it. We have the civil asset forfeiture Bill, Mr. Speaker, the, “explain your wealth”. They opposed that too on the basis that the then administration would use the legislation to go after opponents—well, to go after the UNC and their supporters, Mr. Speaker. That is what they told the public. And then when the public started to look at them kind of sideways, they came with 63 amendments, mostly inconsequential, change made to “shall”, and so on.

The Government of the day accepted five out of the 63, and then we heard, “Eureka, because of us the law is now good. We presented five amendments. The Government accepted it, we could now support the law”, Mr. Speaker. But, again, even the Prime Minister tonight, in talking about the Revenue Authority, talked about weaponizing the legislation against UNC. That has always been the claim. Whenever it is that legislation comes to deal with and clamp down on tax evasion, and issues that are related to tax, we always hear that the Government of the day would use the legislation to go after the UNC. Well, they are in charge now, Mr. Speaker.

As we have been reminded constantly tonight, “The laws will pass. They don’t have to listen to us”, we on this side have been constantly disrespected all evening, Mr. Speaker, especially those of us who are new.

**Hon. Members:** What?

**Mr. D. Romain:** We are being told—no, I am not saying that you all disrespected those of us who are new specifically, but we are new and this is what we have experienced so far.

**Mr. Speaker:** Member, you have half a minute of regular time.

**Mr. D. Romain:** Yes, if I might take the extension, Mr. Speaker. Yeah.

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** Mr. Speaker, I am new to the House so I am not accustomed, so

you all forgive me if this is what normally takes place, but when I hear we are constantly being—some of the barbs that have been thrown across on this side—

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** We heard just now that we are a 12-seater maxi, and all of these different things, Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. Members:** [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

**Mr. Speaker:** Can I advise you to just stick to the topic, rather than be distracted, and let us move on. Please, do not allow yourself to be distracted, stick to the topic. Observe 48(1) and let us just move on.

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Mr. D. Romain:** I appreciate that, coming from the Member, Mr. Speaker.

So the Member for Fyzabad would have given us a litany of woes facing the effective operations of the Board of Inland Revenue, Mr. Speaker, but the challenge that we face is we have still not gotten, to my mind, compelling arguments this evening that would move us to support this Motion. As I said before, it is fait accompli, so it is going to happen whether we like it or not, Mr. Speaker, but we are simply asking that they have—okay, let me not go down that road, Mr. Speaker. Let me not go down that road.

But just to speak to the issue again, Mr. Speaker, of tax evasion, I am of the considered view that the Revenue Authority, had it been allowed to go through, had it been amended, or as Sen. Mark would have mentioned, “modified”, that there could have been compromise reached. I am sure that the population of Trinidad and Tobago would have appreciated that, because there was not much consultation with respect to this measure this evening, Mr. Speaker. When it is Members opposite were on this side, consultation was the order of the day.

Consultation was the buzzword, everything, “We need to consult with the people. We need to hear from the people.” The former administration was accused of being tone-deaf, Mr. Speaker, to the views and the opinions of the population.

*TV6*, *CNC3* would have had their—if you want to call it, “people meter”—when *TV6* had their people meter and they asked the question on this, Mr. Speaker, “Do you support the repeal of the Revenue Authority?”, the overwhelming response, Mr. Speaker, was, “No”. The population did not support it. Likewise, *CNC3*, when they have their, “What the people say” feature, a lot of the people indicated that they did not support it.

It is important, Mr. Speaker, that when we are bringing measures such as these, that before we just come and foist it on the population, give them the opportunity, Mr. Speaker, to be able to weigh in. Because I can tell you, again, when I was campaigning that was one of the main issues that persons were telling me, that, “We send you all to the Parliament and then we doh see you again”, or, “We don’t get an opportunity to be able to share how we feel about national issues, about matters that are being debated in the Parliament, save and except on election day when they cast their ballot, and then that it is.” There is—

**Mr. Speaker:** This is your first contribution—

**Mr. D. Romain:** Yes, Sir.

**Mr. Speaker:**—really, you are pushing the limits on 48(1) now. You are really pushing the limits. Can I gently and respectfully suggest that you just take a little trot.

**Mr. D. Romain:** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. So, I was just making the point about consultation, Mr. Speaker, that I think opportunity should have been provided to the population to weigh in.

Mr. Speaker, Members opposite know very well how to consult with the

budget, you know, they would go around the country and provide opportunities for members of the public to come out and share their views, and similar could have been done with respect to this particular piece of legislation, Mr. Speaker, to find some way to be able to give the population an opportunity to share their views, and perhaps it might have influenced a decision to take a second look, Mr. Speaker, as to how they should have proceeded with this.

So, Mr. Speaker, I want to say, because there is a level of nervousness, this is of course my first—my maiden contribution, and I suppose that as time goes by, Mr. Speaker, I will refine and get a little better, but nevertheless—

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

**Mr. D. Romain:** Thank you. Thank you so much, Mr. Speaker, and with those few words, I rest.

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

**Mr. Speaker:** Before I call on the Minister of Finance, can I just congratulate the Member for Malabar/Mausica on his maiden contribution.

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

**12.45 a.m.**

**The Minister of Finance and the Minister in the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development (Hon. Davendranath Tancoo):** Thank you very much, Mr. Speaker.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** You know, Mr. Speaker, when I heard—and I sat here and I listened to everyone speak—the Members on the opposite side, when I heard their comments today it became increasingly clear not only why they have been completely rejected by the population, but also why this country, Trinidad and Tobago, is in the state that it is in now in terms of our finances. It will take hours

to dispel the mirages, the false narratives, the fear-mongering, et cetera, et cetera, that became characteristic of the commentary on the opposite side, and I really do not think I have the urge to do that, because I think the population has already decided.

The last speaker spoke about two things that I want to respond to. He spoke about why we did not consult. He talked about some *TV 6* People Meter poll. Well, I think he was missing the fact that the population has already had their poll. That is why the population voted against the PNM and in favour of a new Government.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** That is the poll that they followed. And, we on this side were very clear about what our agendas were. We were very clear about our plans. My colleague before that spoke, the Prime Minister spoke, we were very clear. Children's Life Fund—you wanted to know why this one and why that one—Children's Life Fund, promise made, promise kept. TTRA repeal; promise made, promise kept. Now, I know that those on the other side are anxious for more promises to be kept, but hold your horses partners, it coming.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** It coming. This is not the PNM, where promises never materialize. This is the Government of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

**Mr. Scotland SC:** “You all giving back de property tax?”

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** You talk already, Sir?

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Are you talking?

**Mr. Scotland SC:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Look, look, look, look, look, look. When I listened—so, that was one issue.

The other one, is my colleague, the Member for Malabar/Mausica, cited a press release that I issued when I was on that side. Every single word said there, I stand by it as I am standing here. The Member for Diego Martin North/East destroyed the credibility of the BIR, weakened the tax base—

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Correct. I gave some prescriptions there. You want to know why, you want to know what, you want to know—what was the phrase just now? “When dey going to start? How much legal action comin?” Patience, brother, it coming. Patience, it coming. But you see, the thing is, and I want to tie it back to the amnesty that seems to have disturbed you so greatly, when we came to office, we realized that the BIR had been completely emasculated of staff. Completely. I said it earlier—if you had paid attention, you would have known—that right now, the staffing of the BIR is a fraction of what it is supposed to be, less than half of the staff. And, the greatest problem that they have is the compliance officers, because that is what this former Minister and your government did.

You sabotaged the ability of the BIR to go after tax evaders. That is what they did. So, you want to know why it is that we are not going after tax evaders? You want to know why the amnesty? You think I am going against what was said before? When we got into office, and we realized that the BIR needed time to be resuscitated, it needed time because they did not have the tax compliance officers, and therefore, they could not go after errant tax evaders, facilitated by the actions taken by your Government, Sir. That is the reason why you gave a chance for people to fix their business. In the meantime, we will be fixing the BIR. And, I made it very clear, there is a deadline. After that deadline—and the reason for the

amnesty deadline is to facilitate the BIR to be properly equipped to go after tax evaders. That is coming. That is definitely coming, Sir.

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** So—yeah, hold strain, you might be surprised at who some of the tax evaders are, because I heard something very frightening today, you know? I heard something very scary coming from the Members of the PNM, Members of the Opposition. I heard three Members of the Opposition speak on this Bill, and three of them said, “We know who the evaders are”. All three of them said it. So, evading tax is an illegal act, and according to another law, if you know who the criminals are and you know what the crime is that they are committing, you are duty-bound in law to report it. You are duty-bound in law to report it. Otherwise, you are complicit. You know what the worst is—So that clears that. Clearly, the PNM knows who the tax evaders are, and if they know who the tax evaders are, and they have done nothing about it, except to emasculate the BIR so that they cannot go after those who are breaking the law, what does that tell you? It tells you that the PNM is complicit in this whole tax evasion issue.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** That is what it tells you. But the Member for San Fernando East went even further. The Member for San Fernando East, while he was on his legs rambling all over the place talking—

**Hon. Member:** Rubbish

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Irrelevant stuff.

**Hon. Member:** Rubbish. That is parliamentary.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** “Rubbish” is parliamentary?

**Hon. Member:** Yeah, that is parliamentary.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Well, he should have known that because that is all he was spewing tonight. The Member for Fernando East confessed to being engaged in illegal activity. The Member for San Fernando East claims—

**Mr. Manning:** Mr. Speaker.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—that he was—Allow me, Sir.

**Mr. Manning:** I crave your indulgence, please.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** What is the Standing Order?

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

**Hon. Member:** 48(6).

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** I am repeating you.

**Hon. Members:** [*Continuous crosstalk*]

**Mr. Manning:** The Speaker knows.

**Mr. Speaker:** That is not exactly what he said. It was not as clear-cut and unequivocal as that. What he said, we have all been to professionals who have demanded their fees in cash. He did not make such a clear-cut admission. Please.

**Hon. Member:** Withdraw.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Alright, I am being guided by counsel. What—

**Mr. Manning:** Mr. Speaker, 48(6). Will there be a withdrawal?

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Of what?

**Mr. Manning:** I am speaking to the Speaker, thanks.

**Mr. Speaker:** Yes. Minister, the imputation that he was involved in illegal— please withdraw it, and let us move on.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Alright, Mr. Speaker, I withdraw. I withdraw. The Member for San Fernando East said that he was asked to pay cash only and that he was of the view that this was an illegal act. Correct former Minister Junior, Sir? Mr. San Fernando East, did you not say that?

**Mr. Manning:** I did not say that.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Did you not say—

**Mr. Manning:**—I said

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** *Hansard* will prove it.

**Mr. Manning:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** *Hansard* will prove it.

**Mr. Manning:** I did not say that.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** *Hansard* will—but I am telling you what you said. You said very clear—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Selective memory, you know?

**Hon. Member:** “He never used to go to wuk, yuh know.”

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** That is just it. If he used to take his job seriously, he would have paid attention. But you see, it is easy to come here and say anything you want.

**Mr. Manning:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** It is—anything you want. It is easy to come here and say anything you want. But I repeat for your benefit, Sir. If you knew that what was being alleged, what was being asked of you was participating in an illegal act, what did you do about it? Nothing. You facilitated a transaction, Sir.

I have one more. You know, we could go on and on tonight about these rants and raves, and misinformation, and fantasy island stories about devaluation, and this, that, and the other. Mr. Speaker, I think the population has already spoken. I think that we are already clear that this Bill will repeal the Trinidad and Tobago Revenue Authority Act, but it will be remiss of me not to treat with one other issue that was raised by Malabar/Mausica. Unless I heard it wrong—my

colleague from La Brea will tell me if I heard it wrong—I heard, that according to the Member for Malabar/Mausica, citizens of Trinidad and Tobago were better off because of the policies of the PNM. They had more money in their pockets. They were wealthy. Is that not what—they were wealthier. Wow.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Maybe he had more.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Well, perhaps it was true for a few friends and families, and financiers of the PNM, but I can tell you, Sir, that when you are talking about disposable income, talk about the purchasing power of the income.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Talk about what it could buy. Talk about purchasing power parity, because everyone in this country who is living on wages—and that is the problem. You all have an issue with workers asking for more money. You have an issue against workers, generally. That is why under the PNM in the last administration, 55,000 persons lost their jobs; 55,000. Now, I hope that 55,000 persons will contact your hotline, because that is what happened. You all victimized people, you removed people, you shut down Petrotrin. You shut every single thing you could think about. And, you know what is the irony of that? The irony of that is, at the Auditor General's report, you talked about an abundance and abuse of short-term contracts. So what you were doing, despite 55,000 being the official figure of the number of persons who had jobs, who do not have jobs anymore, and you were still—do you know what the true level of unemployment under the PNM must be? Very, very substantial.

The Minister of Legal Affairs, I think the Member for La Brea, I think the Prime Minister have done extremely well—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—in presenting the case for why the TTRA should be repealed. I think they have done extremely well in presenting the case for why the TTRA should be—I noticed too that we are now missing two individuals. The Leader of the Opposition seems to have vanished.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** The Leader of the Opposition seems to have vanished and the Member for Trincity/Maloney seems to have vanished.

**Mr. Padarath:** Where is your leader?

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Where is your leader? Or is it that you do not have a leader?

**Mr. Hosein:** “Dey leaderless.”

**Mr. Padarath:** “Dey gone home to sleep.”

**Mr. Hosein:** “Dey headless.”

**Mr. Padarath:** “De Prime Minister here spoke five times.”

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** It has been hours. It has been hours, since 8.00 p.m. or thereabout.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** It is now, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters, Members of Parliament, colleagues, all, it is now 12.57 a.m.

**Mr. Hosein:** “And we still working.”

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** And we are still working. Members of the Government are here.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Members of the Government, led by the Prime Minister—

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—every single Member of the Government is here, doing the people’s business.

**Hon. Members:** [*Continuous desk thumping and crosstalk*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** And the Opposition Leader, the leader of those on that Bench, have vanished since 8.00 p.m.

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

**Hon. Member:** And she did not speak once.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** And she has not contributed, despite the fact that there have been so many opportunities today. Not a word said in this Parliament.

**Mr. Padarath:** Where is your leader?

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Where is your leader?

**Mr. Padarath:** Where is your leader?

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Before I wrap, Mr. Speaker, there was another issue I think we should touch on because it is—

**Hon. Member:** [*Crosstalk and laughter*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—there is another issue I think I should touch on, Mr. Speaker, because of the fact that it characterizes everything I said in my introduction, everything I said in my opening statement today about the Member for the Diego Martin North/East, every single thing that I said. You see, there is a book that my Prime Minister likes to cite. “How to...”—I cannot use that word—say untruths—“...with Statistics”.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** I used to teach it in a course in UWI.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** But you see, they—

**Hon. Members:** [*Interruption*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** I cannot say. Alright. So, Mr. Speaker, we had a very unfortunate situation during this debate, and I think it must be recorded for *Hansard*. We had an Opposition Member stand up and insist—on a Standing

Order, eh?—that a matter was sub judice, insisted that another Member speaking could not continue in the vein that he was speaking because an appeal was still before the court; insisted that it was still before the court.

**1.00 a.m.**

Insisted that it was still before the court. Mr. Speaker, I have a copy, thanks to my learned friend.

**Mrs. Persad-Bissessar SC:** Which one of your learned friends?

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** My learned friend, well, I only have friends on this side. They are not my learned friends, they are neither learned nor friends. The Member for Tabaquite, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, who is a lawyer—

**Hon. Member:** [*Inaudible*]

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—I “doh” know what you are—who is a lawyer of great repute, has shared with me a document.

Civil Appeal No. CAP268 2022 between the Minister of Finance and one Rohonie Ramkissoon.

Order dated this the 24<sup>th</sup> day of February, 2025 before the Hon. Mr. Justice P. Moosai, JA. Upon reading the notice—

If I may, so, I am quoting the order directly:

Upon reading the notice of application issued on behalf of the respondent and filed on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November, 2024, an affidavit in support of Christi Mohan sworn and filed on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November, 2024, together with exhibits attached thereto. And upon hearing attorney-at-law for the appellant and the attorney-at-law for the respondent, it is hereby ordered that the appellant/defendant’s notice of appeal filed herein on November 16<sup>th</sup> 2022, is struck out.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** But it gets worse:

The appellant to pay the respondent the cost of and associated with this application in the agreed sum of \$10, 000.

The appellant is the Minister of Finance, not this Minister of Finance. Not this Minister of Finance, it is the Member for Diego Martin North/East.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** And the issue there, was the then Minister, the Member for Diego Martin North/East must have or should have known that the appeal had been thrown out and yet he came here to misrepresent, to mislead Parliament and the population by extension. I think, Sir, that that should be followed by an apology.

**Hon. Member:** No, let us carry him to the privileges committee.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** Well, we will treat with that accordingly. That deliberate—

**Dr. Moonilal:** Ought to have known.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** He should have known, and ought to have known, he is in a position to have known—

**Hon. Member:** Since February.

**Hon. D. Tancoo:**—that—correct, since February. That is an unfortunate stain if it is not treated with by this Parliament.

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

**Hon. D. Tancoo:** I am advised, and I take her advice—and take caution, Sir, we will be filing a privilege Motion against that kind of action because we must not allow that mischief to continue.

Mr. Speaker, I think that there has been quite a lot said tonight. I want to thank my colleagues on this side, the Hon. Prime Minister, Member for La Brea, Member for Barataria/San Juan, I want to thank you very much for the contributions tonight. I think you have done very well in terms of clearing up the

misconceptions and the repeated “ole talk” from the Members on the opposite side.

And, Mr. Speaker, with those few 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.*

*Clauses 1 to 3 ordered to stand part of the Bill.*

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

*House resumed.*

*Bill reported, without amendment.*

*Question put:* That the Bill be read a third time.

**Mr. Gonzales:** Division.

**Mr. Imbert:** Division.

*The House divided:* Ayes 27 Noes 11

AYES

Padarath, Hon. B.

Persad-Bissessar SC, Hon. K.

Tancoo, Hon. D.

John, Hon. J.

Moonilal, Hon. Dr. R.

Lee, Hon. Dr. D.

Hosein, Hon. S.

Ameen, Hon. K.

Alexander, Hon. R.

Maharaj, Hon. D.

Mohit, Hon. V.

Sturge, Hon. W.

Bodoe, Hon. Dr. L.

Dowlath, Hon. Dr. M.

Ali, Dr. A.

Morris, W.

Benjamin, Hon. M.

Sobers, Hon. S.

Watts, Hon. P.

Seecheran, Hon. Dr. R.

Kesar, Hon. E.

Elder, Hon. C.

Sam, S.

Narinesingh, H.

Roopnarine, Dr. N.

Gosine, Dr. C.

Thomas, D.

NOES

Gonzales, M.

Imbert, C.

Gadsby-Dolly, Dr. N.

Young SC, F.

Scotland SC, K.

De Nobriga, S.

Manning, B.

Marcelle, K.

Des Vignes, H.

Birchwood, C.

Romain, D.

**Mr. Speaker:** Hon. Members, the results of the division are 27 Members voted in favour of the Bill, 11 Members voted against, and there were no abstentions. The Bill is passed.

*Question agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read the third time and passed.*

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

**Mr. Speaker:** I call on the Leader of the House.

#### **ADJOURNMENT**

**The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath):** Thank you, Mr. Speaker. Mr. Speaker, before I move the adjournment of the House, may I remind colleagues that we have the Standing Finance Committee on Monday, and we start at 1:30 p.m. for the Standing Finance Committee.

Mr. Speaker, in accordance with Standing Order 53, I beg to move that the debate on the Standing Finance Committee Report be—the House be adjourned, sorry, to Wednesday, the 18<sup>th</sup> of June at 1.30 p.m.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*House adjourned accordingly.*

*Adjourned at 1:15 a.m.*