

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Wednesday, September 16, 2026*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

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

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the hon. Phillip Watts, MP, Member for La Horquetta/Talparo; Mr. Marvin Gonzales, Member for Arouca/Lopinot; Mr. Colm Imbert, Member for Diego Martin North/East; Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis, Member for Trincity/Maloney. Those who have requested leave of absence from today's Sitting of the House, leave has been granted.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (AMDT.) BILL, 2026

Bill to amend the Freedom of Information Act, Chap. 22:02, brought from the Senate [*The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance*]; read the first time.

Motion made: That the next stage be taken later in the proceedings. [*Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh*]

Question put and agreed to.

PRIME MINISTER'S QUESTION**Port of Spain General Hospital****(Operationalization of Central Block)**

Mr. Stuart Young SC (*Port of Spain North/ St Ann's West*): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker, and welcome to the Prime Minister. I am told that I am fortunate. I got the one question out of 13 submitted today to the Prime Minister.

UNREVISED

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Young SC: Would the Prime Minister advise this House as to when the New Central Block at the Port of Spain General Hospital will be operationalized?

The Prime Minister (Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I never cease to be amazed and flabbergasted—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—that the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West could bring this question to us on this side of the House. It reflects the audacity and hypocrisy of the Opposition—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—which has no bounds, clearly no bounds.

It was on the 19th of November, 2019 that your Government, your administration, turned the sod for the Port of Spain Central Block, which cost about \$1.3 billion. And when you turned that sod to open it on March 10, 2025, one of the biggest charades was perpetrated on the people of T&T when a practical completion ceremony, whatever that means, was held. And at that time, at that time the facility was still a major construction site and very, very, very far from completion.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And now, today this Member is asking this question, together with his former Cabinet colleagues who had then hastily arranged for medical equipment, furniture to be moved from one facility to another. I remember that, you know. They moved it out, it was not ready, it was a construction site. It was a con job on the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And so they moved equipment and furniture, and

so on, to another stage, from one facility to another so they could put on and outfit one floor at that Central Block to give the impression that the facility was completed and about to be operationalized. This is tantamount, some may say, and I will not accuse you of it, but some may say this is tantamount to fraud of the highest order.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Thankfully, Madam Deputy Speaker, on April 28, 2025, the people of Trinidad and Tobago rejected those attempts to deceive and hoodwink them. Since then, my administration has been working to complete the outstanding work and at the same time we are putting together a plan to have the hospital, the block, up and running. We are working on the additional staffing, outfitting and programme development.

The Minister of Health, together with UDeCOTT, has advised that these works, early identified, are far from advanced and will be nearing completion when the Minister will then give us further details. So we have a team working to get that block up and running once and for all. I thank you very much.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

URGENT QUESTION

Port of Spain General Hospital

Malfunctioning Walk-In Refrigerator

Mr. Stuart Young SC (*Port-of-Spain North/ St Ann's West*): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. To the Minister of Health: In light of reports of decomposing bodies at the Port of Spain General Hospital's Mortuary due to the malfunctioning of the walk-in refrigerator, could the Minister state what steps are being taken to address this situation?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Minister of Health.

The Minister of Health (Hon. Dr. Lackram Bodoie): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to assure this House and the Member that there are no decomposing bodies at the Port of Spain General Hospital mortuary. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am advised that the refrigerator for the mortuary is operational and the backup generator is fully functional.

There are two compressors serving the mortuary fridge system, one primary compressor and one secondary standby compressor. The primary compressor is currently non-functional. However, the secondary compressor is operational and is presently maintaining the fridge at the proper temperature. Therefore, the mortuary fridge is currently functional. At this time the unit remains operational on the secondary compressor and is being monitored, pending replacement. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's West.

Mr. Young SC: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. To the Minister of Health, in light of your previous response to this House that the Central Block would be open in July of this year, why is the hon. Prime Minister now saying she does not know when it would be open?

Madam Deputy Speaker: That is an entirely different question, Member. Do you have any other supplemental questions? Okay.

ARRANGEMENT OF BUSINESS

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am advised that Statements by Ministers will be held later in the proceedings. Leader of the House.

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEES

(CHANGE OF MEMBERSHIP)

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

Deputy Speaker, on resumption from the break, the Government advised the Parliament, through the office of the Speaker, of our membership regarding both the joint select committees and the sessional committees, and therefore we are prepared for both, but I am advised that the Opposition has not provided the information to the Parliament, despite resuming.

Madam Deputy Speaker, whereas it has become necessary to make appointments to joint select committees, I beg to move that this House agree to the following appointments please:

1. On the Joint Select Committee on Energy Affairs:
 - Mr. Clyde Elder, Member of Parliament, in lieu of Mr. David Lee, MP.
2. On the Joint Select Committee on Foreign Affairs:
 - Dr. Roodal Moonilal, MP, in lieu of Mr. Davendranath Tancoo, MP.
 - Mr. Barry Padarath, MP, in lieu of Mr. Wayne Sturge, MP.
 - Mr. David Joseph Thomas, MP, in lieu of Mr. Clyde Elder, MP.
3. On the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity:
 - Dr. Narendra Roopnarine, MP, in lieu of Mr. Barry Padarath, MP.
4. On the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure:
 - Mr. Devesh Maharaj, MP, in lieu of Mr. Saddam Hosein, MP.
5. On the Joint Select Committee on State Enterprises:
 - Mr. Hansen Narinesingh, MP, in lieu of Mr. Barry Padarath, MP.

Thank you most kindly, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (AMDT.) BILL, 2026

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Madam Deputy Speaker, I beg to move:

That a Bill to amend the Freedom of Information Act, Chap. 22:02, be now read a second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you again for welcoming me back to this House. On the last occasion, I was able to thank the hon. Prime Minister in her absence, but I wish to place on record in her presence my sincere gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago for her confidence and trust and the opportunity to contribute once again to the politics of Trinidad and Tobago as I am allowed to, and I am asked to lead the amendments being proposed today, for the Freedom of Information (Amdt.) Bill, 2026.

To give some historical context to the Bill before us today, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is important to note that the Freedom of Information Act of 1999 was assented to on November 04, 1999, and came into effect on February 20, 2001. It was designed in support of the following tenets of governance: transparency, accountability, equality of access and empowerment and increased participation.

When the Freedom of Information Bill was laid in Parliament on April 30, 1999, our Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, who in her capacity then as the Minister of Legal Affairs, supported the Bill. And by supporting that Bill, our hon. Prime Minister demonstrated that she is a strong advocate of these tenets of governance.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And under the leadership of our hon. Prime Minister, these tenets have been our core function and foundation on how this

administration has been governing and will continue to govern for the well-being of all the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago.

In her contribution to the Freedom of Information Act of 1999, the hon. Prime Minister stated on April 30, 1999, and I quote:

“...information is about, that empowerment one can have from having information and having knowledge about things. It is clear then that there can be no true democracy if there is no freedom of information.”

This Bill is fundamentally seeking to empower our citizens to have access to information as stated by our esteemed Prime Minister. This Bill is about empowering our citizens to be part of the democratic process. It is empowering our citizens to hold the public accountable and public authorities even more so. Through the amendments of this Bill, we are not attempting to undermine any of the core tenets of governance under which the Freedom of Information Act was established. On the contrary, the amendments of this Bill are in fact advancing the very tenets of governance. This Bill is advancing transparency, accountability, equality of access and empowerment and increased participation, which, Madam Deputy Speaker, are in fact key cornerstones of a thriving democratic society.

1.45 p.m.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to categorically state at the outset that this Bill does not seek to alter the fundamental right of access established under the Freedom of Information Act. It does not restrict the categories of information that citizens may access, introduce new expectations or alter the process by which a citizen may request an official document. The Bill, and the purpose of this Bill, is to update and streamline the publication requirements under Part II of the Act by

expanding the mechanisms through which certain information that public authorities are already required to publish can be made available.

Therefore, we all need to understand that the amendments to this Bill seek to remove requirements for the publication, in a daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago, of a public authority's annual public statement, and to replace it with requirements for those statements to be published either in a daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago or on a publicly accessible website. We are not eliminating one publication format to be replaced with another, as most people seem to interpret the amendment. We are adding the option of publication on a publicly accessible website.

Another key feature in this discussion that I would like to bring to the onset is access by persons with disabilities. Websites facilitate persons with visual impairments, hearing impairments and others that hinder reading of traditional documents. Software that transcribes information from text to audio exists, as well as programmes that allow persons to enlarge screen sizes, providing greater options for persons with disabilities to access public information. Therefore, in this Government's goal to increase access, amending the Bill to include a publicly accessible website supports the goals of an all-inclusive society. To ease some of the concerns raised in previous discussions, persons who do not have access to the technology still have the option of the print media via the *Trinidad and Tobago Gazette* or a local newspaper.

A Trinidad and Tobago *Express* opinion column on September 04, 2026, entitled: "Reject FOI Amendment Bill" by G. Elias of Cascade states:

"The proposed Freedom of Information Amendment Bill 2026 is being sold to the public as sensible modernisation, but it is actually nothing of the sort.

Allowing public authorities to publish annual statements online instead of in the daily newspapers risks making government information less visible, less accessible and, ultimately, less accountable.”

This is the misconception that needs to be corrected through this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. The phrase “instead of”, as used by the contributor, is misleading. We are increasing the visibility and access to public information by putting into law the inclusion of a website for the access to public information for everyone. We are not disposing of one medium for another.

The Trinidad and Tobago *Guardian*, in a September 12th article entitled: “FOIA Bill sparks debate over online public notices, media viability”, stated it correctly by adding:

“The proposed amendment would remove the requirement for a public authority’s annual public statements to be published in a daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago. Instead, the statements could be published either in a daily newspaper or on a publicly accessible website.”

This simply means that public records cannot be withheld because an agency may not have the releases or funding at a point in time to publish these public documents in a newspaper. The availability of these documents via publicly accessible website also ensures that our agencies undertake their duties to make public information available to the public. Therefore, in this Government’s quest to be accountable to the public, we are adding the option of another avenue for access.

To correct where some may attempt to propagate, this Government is not taking newspapers or media houses out of the equation. Public authorities would still be required to publish information in the *Gazette*, while the second method of

publication could either be a daily newspaper or a publicly accessible website. As Trinidad and Tobago continues along the pathway of modernization to become a more digitally enabled society, we must respond to our changing environment and make the necessary legislative adjustments that will strategically position us to effectively embrace the benefits of digitization.

The amendments in this Bill are not asking us to abandon any already established medium of communication. In fact, it is telling us that as a country on a pathway to full digitization, we must embrace other mediums. Therefore, the proposal to change to a medium of communication on a digital platform that allows public authorities to publish their annual public statements still provides an avenue to make the information available.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to draw your attention to some specifics of the amendments in this Bill. The Freedom of Information (Amdt.) Bill is seeking to amend sections 7, 8, and 9 of the Freedom of Information Act. These sections in the Act establish important proactive publication obligations for public authorities. Section 7 requires public authorities to publish information concerning, among other things, their organization and functions, categories of documents held, procedures through which members of the public may request access to documents, and the offices responsible for receiving and acting upon requests.

Sections 8 and 9 simply addresses the publication of information concerning documents available for inspection or purchase, and certain rules, policies, guidelines and practices used by public authorities. These publications are significant because this Government believes that freedom of information should not operate only when a citizen submits a request. As a democratic society, we must practise proactive disclosure. This means that public institutions have a

responsibility to citizens to make important information, as dictated by legislation, readily available without having to make a formal request.

Freedom of information must not be understood solely as a system under which citizens have to ask government for information. This Government is undertaking the amendments to this Bill because we believe that a modern freedom of information framework must also require government to make appropriate information available proactively. Indeed, that principle is already embedded in our legislation. The object of the Freedom of Information Act is to make information concerning the operations of public authorities available to the public, and to ensure that policies, rules, practices and authorizations affecting citizens are readily available.

In fact, Madam Deputy Speaker, when this Government came into office and I was appointed Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, the administrative reports of the Ministry that was entrusted to me were behind by 10 years. In an effort to meet our obligation, we have already updated and reviewed nine of the 10 years. Seven reports have been laid before Parliament, and by the end of this fiscal year, we are aiming to have all of the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development's administrative reports completed and laid before Parliament, and indeed, all of us as Ministers have been so directed by the hon. Prime Minister. This is one of the key objectives of the Bill, Madam Deputy Speaker, ensuring that the Government meets its obligation to provide information to the public. As I have stated before, we are merely widening the channels through this amendment.

My involvement in this process to modernize how government engages with the populace goes way back, Madam Deputy Speaker. In another dispensation, I

was Minister of Public Administration and Information from 2007 to 2010, spearheading numerous transformation initiatives in human resource development, public service delivery and digital governance. Coincidentally, I also served as President of the Caribbean Telecoms Union, in 2008 and 2010. The National ICT Company of Trinidad and Tobago, iGovTT, was established, creating Trinidad and Tobago's government portal and backbone. During my time as Minister of Public Administration and Information, I spearheaded the modernization of public services through innovative ICT solutions.

The journey to iGovTT's formation was marked by a series of significant milestones in the realm of telecommunications and information technology governance that began as far back as 1989. By 2009, these efforts culminated in the creation of iGovTT, a state-owned entity, dedicated to driving ICT excellence and providing public service delivery for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Our history reflects the Government's unwavering commitment to leveraging technology for national development. In essence, the approach then and now is not just the elements of the technology, but how it modernizes government services, makes life easier for our citizens and enhance the work of government. The amendments to this Bill contribute to those efforts, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The annual public statement is not merely seen as an advertisement. It is an instrument of proactive transparency, modernization, expanding services and access through our thrust to make life better for Trinidad and Tobago. Internationally, we see examples of this approach. In the United Kingdom, public authorities are required to maintain publication schemes through which specified categories of information, including annual reports and financial information, are proactively made available via online means.

In Australia, the information publication scheme requires government agencies to proactively publish information about their functions, structure, salutory appointments, annual reports and other categories of information directly to the public online. We can see that modern freedom of information systems do not simply wait for citizens to ask questions. They increasingly require governments to put information into the public domain in advance. This is indicative of this Kamla Persad-Bissessar-led Government's continuous drive to be innovative, open and available to citizens of Trinidad and Tobago through the provision of information.

Where the existing legislation requires publication in the *Gazette* and in the daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago, the amendment retains the requirement for publication in the *Gazette* and provides that the second method of publication may be either daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago or publicly accessible website.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to emphasize that this Bill does not abolish newspaper publication. The Bill does not remove the requirement for publication in the *Gazette* nor does it abolish newspaper publication as an option. Rather, it introduces greater flexibility in the second method through which statutory publication requirement may be fulfilled. It does not prohibit a public authority from continuing to use newspapers. This Bill is proposing an additional medium for public authorities to fulfil their statutory publication requirement.

Section 8 deals with certain documents used by public authorities in making decisions or recommendations, providing advice to members of the public, or enforcing written laws or schemes where members of the public may be directly affected. Section 8(2)(a) currently provides, and I quote:

“A public authority shall—

- (a) as soon as practicable after the commencement of this Act—
 - (i) cause copies of all documents to which this section applies in respect of the public authority to be made available for inspection and for purchase by members of the public; and
 - (ii) with the approval of the responsible Minister, cause to be published in the *Gazette* and in the daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago, a statement (which may be in the form of an index) specifying the documents that are, at the time of preparation of the statement, so available and the place or places where copies may be inspected and may be purchased...”

Section 8(2)(b) further requires the public authority:

“...at intervals of 12 months...”—to publish—“...statements bringing... information...in the previous...statements.”—up to date.

Under the existing law, those updated statements must also be published in the *Gazette* and in the daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Deputy Speaker, clause 2(1)(b) retains publication in the *Gazette* but provides that the additional publication may be:

“...‘either in a daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago or on a publicly accessible website,’;”

Clause 2(1)(c) then makes the corresponding amendments to section 9(2)(a) and (b). Section 9 concerns specified categories of documents in the possession of a public authority, including reports, studies, assessments, policy documents and other records identified under section 9(1).

2.00 p.m.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the effect of the amendment is the same. Publication in the *Gazette* remains a requirement, then additional method of publication may be either a daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago or a publicly accessible website. The legislative amendments are a reflection of this Government's foresight to make the necessary changes required to ensure that the citizens can, in a very tangible way, benefit from a digitalized economy. It makes no sense to say that we want to be a modern digital society, and we do not make services available to our citizens on a digitized platform.

It is the firm intention of this administration to move our nation to a more advanced state of digitalization. We have started and we will continue to use technology to improve the quality of lives of our citizens by making public services and information easier to access and government easier to navigate. This Bill recognizes that the technological environment in which the Freedom of Information Act was established is a far cry from the technological environment we are in today. As I have said last week in this honourable House, for any country to progress and develop for the benefit of its citizens, it must be in a continuous state of reform. We cannot continue with blinded eyes to the changes in our environment. We cannot continue with blinded eyes to the technological capability of our citizens, both young and old.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the question I wish to pose to those on the other side is this, why did you not bring this piece of legislation to this House when you were in government?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: We on this side recognize that the way citizens interact with our public institutions have changed considerably since the Freedom of Information Act was assented to in 1999. We as a country are far more advanced in the state of our technology now than what existed in 1999. The citizens have adapted to this technological change. According to the World Bank's most recent country data, 82 per cent of individuals in Trinidad and Tobago are using the Internet in 2024. That level of Internet use reflects how significantly the information landscape has evolved. For a substantial majority of our population, accessing information online is now part of everyday life.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the website option modernizes the way in which the State communicates with its citizens because of the fundamental differences between the technological landscape of 1999 and 2026. Today, a publicly accessible website can make information available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It can allow citizens in Port of Spain, San Fernando, Tobago, any community across the country, and even in the diaspora across the globe to access the same document without having to locate a newspaper copy on a particular day.

A dedicated website can also allow the information to be searched, downloaded, archived and linked to related government information. This is not simply a "Trinidad and Tobago innovation", this is an advancement applied globally, Madam Deputy Speaker, therefore the proposed amendments do not weaken transparency. Through this Government's strong track record of implementation, these amendments can make transparency more accessible, more permanent and more useful. This administration is demonstrating its agility to adapt to changes in our technological environment and adopt the necessary technological changes through this piece of legislation.

We are not removing one medium of communication and replacing it with another. It is creating another option for public institutions to provide information so those who need it can access it. Madam Deputy Speaker, this administration, in just over one year, has demonstrated its agility to respond to technological changes. We have brought a number of pieces of legislation to this honourable House to address the digital needs of our citizens.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to re-emphasize that public authorities remain accountable for making the information prescribed under sections 7, 8 and 9 of the Freedom of Information Act available to the public. What Parliament has been asked to recognize is that publication on a “publicly accessible website” can now constitute an appropriate means of satisfying that obligation alongside publication in a daily newspaper. The amendment does not diminish the principle of access established by the parent Act. It does not create a new exemption for disclosure. It does not restrict the right to request information or remove the proactive publication requirement imposed upon public authority. Rather, it seeks to modernize the statutory mechanism through which those existing obligations can be fulfilled.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this administration acknowledges that conducting research on publicly accessible websites is a common practice for a significant majority of our population. This amendment is indicative of that. However, in this amendment, we are also maintaining publication in a daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago for those who may access information differently. Madam Deputy Speaker, we must recognize that not every citizen interacts with the Government in the same way. For that reason, I do not believe we should dismiss the value of the newspaper as a means of public communication. A newspaper

publication and a website publication perform different functions. A website is excellent for permanence, searchability, and immediate access.

A newspaper can provide visibility and public notice to persons who may not otherwise go looking for information on a particular government website. Our own history demonstrates that public authorities have used newspapers to bring freedom of information statements into the public domain. Trinidad and Tobago's public authorities have historically published such statements through the newspapers, and may continue to make these statements available, electronically, today. The answer, therefore, is not to declare one medium of communication superior to another. The answer is to provide public authorities with an appropriate modern choice that is precisely what this Government seeks to do through this amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, while this legislation, which on the surface may appear to be a modest administrative amendment, it has a much broader significance for transparency, accountability and public access to information in Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Deputy Speaker, I support this amendment because I believe it preserves the principle of proactive disclosure, while bringing the mechanism of disclosure into the realities of the 21st Century. I want to make an important qualification, Madam Deputy Speaker. We must not confuse "digital publication" with "meaningful public access". Putting a document somewhere on a website and saying that, it is available to the public, is not enough.

If we are working towards modernizing the law, we must modernize the standards of accessibility as well. A "publicly accessible website" should mean a website where the information can be found without unreasonable difficulty, access without payment, or unnecessary registration by members of the public.

Information should be clearly identified, dated, kept current, and maintained in an accessible archive. International practice supports this approach. Many jurisdictions emphasize that published information should be accurate, up-to-date and complete, and should be readily discoverable by the public.

Therefore, Madam Deputy Speaker, we take this amendment not simply as a choice between paper and electronic publication, but as an opportunity to establish a modern standard for proactive public disclosure. Madam Deputy Speaker, there is also a very practical public administration consideration. The present requirement obliges public authorities to reproduce their annual statements to prescribe publication channels every year. Where a public authority already maintains an effective official website, publication on that website can provide a permanent and easily accessible record of the statement. That can reduce administrative burden and potentially reduce the cost associated with repeated newspaper publication, while still preserving the fundamental obligation to disclose.

Importantly, Madam Deputy Speaker, this approach is entirely consistent with the original philosophy of our Freedom of Information Act. The Act itself says that its:

“...provisions...”—are to—“...be interpreted so as to...facilitate and promote...”—disclosure—“...promptly and at the lowest reasonable cost...”

Therefore, the proposed amendment is not moving us away from the principle of the Freedom of Information Act. It is, in fact, bringing the method of disclosure in closer alignment with those principles.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Trinidad and Tobago should aspire to a freedom of information system in which citizens do not have to become experts in government

bureaucracy simply to find out what their government is doing. We are creating a system in which public information is visible, discoverable and accessible. We are also creating a system in which citizens have the autonomy, the option, and thus the tools to be part of the governance process by providing access to public records. This Government is implementing proactive access to public information by utilizing and enhancing the value of traditional print and electronic media.

Therefore, amending the Freedom of Information Act accentuates this Government's commitment to communicate with citizens beyond the mechanisms designed for the information environment of 1999. Through this Bill, we are preserving accountability. We are preserving accessibility. We are modernizing our obligation to communicate with the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Importantly, we are proactively meeting their needs for information from the Government.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I therefore support the principle that an annual public statement should be made available to the public, either through publication or in a daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago, or through a publicly accessible website. But I would go further, where the website option is used, the public authority should ensure that the statement is clearly identified, freely accessible, downloadable, current, and retained in an online archive. Because, ultimately, Madam Deputy Speaker, the objective is not the newspaper, the objective is not the website, the objective is transparency. The objective is accountability and to ensure that information belonging to the people of Trinidad and Tobago is brought into the public domain in a manner that all citizens can actually access and use.

That, Madam Deputy Speaker, is what a modern freedom of information regime should deliver. We are moving beyond information, merely existing towards it being available for citizens to be part of the governance process. Within the Strategic National Development Plan of Trinidad and Tobago, developed by this administration, Strategic Pillar (i), speaks of “Restoring Confidence and Fiscal Stability”. To support this, one of the focal areas under the pillar is strengthening institutions. One of the means of strengthening institutions is by boosting transparency, and this Bill, by adding another option for the public to view an authority’s annual public statement is a step in boosting, not only transparency, but citizens’ participation. Because, Madam Deputy Speaker, it means that more persons can now access and view these statements, thereby increasing the level of accountability.

This administration is cognizant that the country’s economic future hinges directly on strategic economic transformation, and one of those prerequisites is that public institutions must be strengthened. This Bill, Madam Deputy Speaker, is part of a cornerstone necessary to boost institutional integrity so that economic development can take place by incorporating the views that our citizens, through access to information, can participate more widely in the governance process. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, with those few words, I beg to move.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

2.15 p.m.

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

very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. Madam Deputy Speaker, we on this side immediately put on the record that we are not against digitization nor the use of technology in the advancement of Trinidad and Tobago. In fact, it was this administration that actually had a whole Ministry to do that work and that was the Ministry of Digital Transformation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Young SC: The record would reflect. Thankfully, that there are still open-source records that have not been wiped, as websites can be wiped and have been wiped, with information disappearing overnight, and there are still newspaper articles and records that it was this Government that really began the advancement of the use of digital technology. We are glad to see a continuation.

I think it is important, Madam Deputy Speaker, to put into context the Freedom of Information Act and it is, in fact, a good piece of legislation that was passed. However, over time, and it has been now almost three decades of it being applied in Trinidad and Tobago, it is clear that there is an abuse by state entities, Ministries—public bodies is what the law talks about—that fall within the ambit of this legislation and Freedom of Information. So I think it would be useful to put into context the purpose and the policy behind this legislation as we debate today what appears to be a laudable initiative by the Government, save for the use of the word “or” instead of “and”. But, there is no doubt that we are moving in the right direction to allow, via legislation, for the publication—and it is only at specific statements identified in the piece of legislation.

So, I listened to the Minister, and at times he seemed to be suggesting, when he talked about transparency and accountability and the provision of information to the population, as though they were all of a sudden, via this proposed amendment,

going to provide the population—in fact, it was a particular part of his read presentation where he talked about, it is better we do this so citizens do not have to apply for information, but we put the information out there. I am paraphrasing. However, it is clear that these amendments do not go that far; maybe it is something that can be looked at in the future. These amendments, as the Minister did touch on, are very, very specific in their applicability to sections 7, 8, and 9 of the parent Act, the Freedom of Information Act, which set out the type of statements that are required to be published and the type of information that is required to be published there. It is in no way whatsoever broad enough to capture the ambit and depth of information that this particular piece of legislation, the Freedom of Information Act, is meant to cover.

I think it would be useful for us to go to a recent decision, well, not so recent anymore, 2024, of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, because they have quite usefully summarized and surmised for us the population what is the policy behind this legislation and the policy that the Government is now coming today to make amendments to. It is the decision of *Devant Maharaj vs the National Gas Company of Trinidad and Tobago*. A decision that was—actually it was given in April of this year, so it is fairly recent. This is the Privy Council; Lord Sales in a unanimous decision, he says at paragraph:

“4. FOIA is a major piece of legislation designed to give members of the public access to information held by public authorities in documentary form, subject to the operation of certain exemptions. The courts in Trinidad and Tobago have rightly emphasised the importance of the right to information created by FOIA to inform debate in a democratic society:”

And that is the policy and purpose of this particular piece of legislation.

Today, these amendments do not in any way really broaden the provision of that information, save for the addition, legislatively now, that it is open to a public body to also publish on something that the Bill calls that is undefined, a “publicly accessible website”. We will come to that in a short while. The Privy Council, after listing some decisions from the Court of Appeal that really were developed because it is when public bodies are trying to exempt the provision of information, goes on to say:

“...the Act recognises that access to information held by public bodies has to be restricted in some circumstances in recognition of the functions carried out by them in the public interest and in recognition of certain private and business affairs of private persons”

So, talking about the exemptions. Then, later on in this decision at paragraph 42, when they get into the discussion under the rubric of:

“The importance of freedom of information in a democratic society”
—which fortunately, we still are a democratic society despite the assaults on our democracy within recent times. Paragraph 42 says:

“FOIA is an important statute which sets out in section 3(1) a right for members of the public to gain access to information in the possession of public authorities... The importance and force of the right is emphasised by section 3(2)... That has also rightly been emphasised by decisions of the Court of Appeal, in particular in Caribbean Information Access”—JCC, the—“Joint Consultative Council and in the present case”

They go on to say:

“Debate in a democracy about matters of public concern is enhanced and made more effective by the public having access to information about them

which is held by”—those—“public authorities (including in particular the authorities making decisions about those matters), so far as is reasonably possible and so far as is compatible with countervailing aspects of the public interest.”

I have taken the time, Madam Deputy Speaker, to just set that context for the population who are looking on to understand the type of legislation we are dealing with here today and the importance of this Freedom of Information Act.

To get specifically now to the amendments that the Government has brought before us here today, it is really an amendment to add, as the Minister said, an option for the publication on something called a “publicly accessible website.” So this piece of legislation at sections 7, 8, and 9, sets out certain reports that have to be published and we would have seen it as members of the population and as citizens perusing newspapers from time to time. You would see pages of information published by Ministries, by state entities and enterprises who fall under the definition of public bodies, setting out who they should write to for information, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera, and that is all it is. But what is important and it appears innocuous here, is that right now it is mandatory for that information to be published, those reports and information to be published in the *Gazette* as well as in a daily newspaper.

The Government’s proposed amendment is now seeking to say “or”. So, it has been published in the *Gazette*, that is staying and now in a daily newspaper “or on a publicly accessible website.” The question that immediately arises is, in this day and age, where I am sure we will all recognize, most of us being elected Members of Parliament, that when you are dealing with the constituency of Trinidad and Tobago, there are different methods of communicating to different

age groups and categories of persons. So, for example, there is a certain part of our population, a certain segment, mostly those who are more experienced and have a lot more age under their belt, who still would read the newspapers on a daily basis, who still would tune in at 7 o'clock to watch the news. There are others, our younger members of society, who will never, and probably have never, opened a traditional daily newspaper.

So, the Government's proposal to add publicly accessible websites is good in that regard. Because what it does is it recognizes, especially as the world moves forward, less and less people may actually be looking at daily newspapers. And, of course, the daily newspapers globally now, even in small island States, smaller than ours, publish their newspapers online as well. It is no longer confined to what we call print physical newspaper. So, from that aspect, we fully support the move to include. This is not the first piece of legislation that does it, to expressly state that you can publish or should publish information on websites.

But immediately, some of the dangers with this, despite our best intentions sitting here as legislators, are on the implementation side of it. Because I can challenge any person in Trinidad and Tobago or in the world to go now to government websites of Trinidad and Tobago to see whether the information is up to date, and they will find, in many, many instances, it is not, one example.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Young SC: So we must deal in reality.

One example, the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property Act mandates that every public body must publish on their website the procurement that they intend to do; at the end of every year, what has been done, and who it has been awarded to, et cetera. And, a few weeks after the national budget is read,

they must publish what their procurement is going to be for the rest of the year. The vast majority of our public bodies and entities are not doing that for one reason or the other. So, what makes us think now, by shifting—because let us not fool ourselves.

The Government has brought this piece of legislation, this amendment and they have chosen “or” instead of “and” because they intend to use the newspapers less and less, and to publish less and less in the newspapers, whether that is wielded as a sword, whether it is wielded as a threat, whatever it might be, that is the fact. Because if they had said “and”, it would have maintained that status quo and also have allowed the publication on websites. I took the opportunity just to make the point of how dangerous it is now to introduce “or” in the hope that the information would be kept up to date, because these sections 7, 8 and 9 also have a requirement that after your initial publication of information, with the passage of a certain amount of time, you have to update that information.

The Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries, where the world looks to see our oil and gas production information, today, on the 16th of September, the information on that stops cold as at March 2026. Months ago; yet another example of how the accessibility of information on the Internet and on websites is failing in reality. So it is our suggestion at this point in time, is whilst there is still a large segment of society that looks to the daily newspaper and does not access websites, while they may access a phone, a smart device, a computer to go on to the Internet, they are not going to casually come across this information, which might be the perfect segue at this time to ask the Minister what exactly is the intention or the understanding of the undefined term “publicly accessible website.”

Some of the debate in the other place was sent to us and we took a look at it

and I can tell you from a legal perspective, I disagree with the position that was taken there, where it was said that, well, on a literal interpretation of “publicly accessible website”, that is sufficient.

2.30 p.m.

So, for example, an entity, what does a “publicly accessible website” mean? Is it that the State is going to usefully put, for example, on a specific website, all of the information? So a member of the public, having access to the Internet, can go to that one website and get the information for any Ministry, any public body, and see what has been published there? Or, is it that they are expected to go all around the mulberry bush? If they find the information on some innocuous website that is undefined, they then find information that is outdated, et cetera.

So, the question becomes, and we all know it, in particular those who may practice in the area of law, that when this type of definition is used that is vague, that is not defined, that there are no parameters, nine out of 10 times, unfortunately, it is going to lead to problems. It is going to lead to somebody looking at it and saying, well, what is a publicly accessible website? Is that the Ministry’s website? Is that the MTS website? Is that the NP website? Is that the NGC website? To use a few examples.

Or, because as it stands, a publicly accessible website is any website in the World Wide Web, apart from the dark web. Because I assume that that dark web is somewhere that is not easily publicly accessible or publicly accessible, I do not know. But this is now leaving the ocean, to use that analogy, wide, wide open for publication, where we are already having difficulties in Trinidad and Tobago, that public bodies are not implementing this law, that are not following the mandatory requirements to publish very specific information on their websites.

The non-publication, for example, of proposed procurement projects on a public body's website, by not publishing that, in breach of that particular law that specifies it is supposed to be published there, not on a publicly accessible website, it states on the public body's website and it mandates that they have a website for that, if they did not already have a website, and they are not doing it, could lead, for example, to corruption because the population and the public do not know what is going on. We do not want that to happen with these reports that have to be published under the freedom of information.

So, the suggestion is, change that "or" to an "and", at least at this stage. I can foresee in the not-too-distant future that the print newspapers or whatever is the definition of newspapers, will contract even more. It could be looked at, at that time. But at this point in time, it is our position that consideration should be given to maintaining. "Doh make it an option because we know where dat option is going." It is clear where that option is going, especially on reading some of what was said in the other place. Whether it was said with the condonement of the whole Government, or whether it was one person off on a frolic of his own. So, we question what is a publicly accessible website, and why not say "and" instead of "or". And we are identifying some of the dangers.

Now, the Minister said a number of things that I would like to just highlight. One of the things he said at the outset is:

This legislation, is the Government being transparent, providing information and facts.

The reality is, and that that is the ethos, if I may paraphrase, of how the Government has been performing thus far in their last 18 months, lest the population forget because the way you hear some behave here, you would believe

they only just stepped into power, and not 18 months ago, and have been in charge for 18 months. We the population have experienced the exact opposite. I am constantly being bombarded as I am sure as all on this side by citizens and by constituents asking, for example, why there are no more post-Cabinet press conferences, where questions could be asked by the media for transparency. So, do not come here and try and fool the population that you are accountable and that you—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1) relevance. I do not think that has anything to do with the debate. It is a very simple piece of legislation and a simple amendment.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I do agree, please stick to the clauses of the Bill. Thank you.

Mr. S. Young SC: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. The point has been made, and the population has seen the reaction.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Young SC: The Minister also said that:

The purpose of this Bill is to update and streamline. Streamline publication. His words. Focus on the use of that word “streamline”. It is not a broadening. So do not try to fool us by saying “Well, we are broadening access to information here”. They utilize that word in a carefully prepared script of “streamline” to indicate clearly that they are narrowing where this information will be published. And that is always going to be a dangerous thing, because as we will examine in a short while, accessibility to websites, the ability by an entity to then go afterwards and manipulate what is on a website.

You see, when you publish it in the newspaper, that is it, it is out there. You have no control to then go and change something that you then realize is embarrassing to you, et cetera. But I guarantee you, seeing how they operate, there will be instances when they publish on a website and then immediately when you are embarrassed by something, they are going to try and change it.

This introduction introduces access—

I am quoting:

This introduction introduces access to persons of disability.

Laudable, completely agreed. That is an excellent initiative. I hope that the Government gets it done because the Minister is correct. On a website, you could have a button for audio, whereas the newspaper may not have that. But the same thing exists in newspapers today. Accessing a newspaper online, you can press on some of them, and it will read it out, but that is a great initiative. We accept that, that once it is on a screen, on the internet, you can zoom in, you can check things, et cetera. Agreed fully.

But there have also been instances—and we are concerned on this side, there have also been instances since April 2025—well, actually May 2025, where government websites and Ministry websites that had information related to the achievements of the previous government and of Trinidad and Tobago, “voosh”, vanished, nowhere to be seen anymore. And that is one of the risks.

In fact, you had a Minister, it is the most remarkable thing, a Minister go yesterday and try in one sentence in trying to save his portfolio, try to change history with respect to relationships with Venezuela.

Dr. Gadsby-Dolly: “Yeah, boy. It crazy.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Young SC: It was also said that persons still have access—and this was another statement made by the Minister piloting the Bill:

Persons will still have access to the *Gazette* and newspaper.

Factually incorrect. That will only exist if you use the word, “and”, because if you now choose to go the route of website and *Gazette*, which this amendment allows, what access to newspaper you are talking about? So do not try to pull the wool.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Young SC: This Government—

This Government believes that a citizen should not only have access to information via an application.

Again, we take umbrage with that, because it is holding out that all of a sudden, the information that has to be published by sections 7, 8, and 9 is the type of information that you would have to make an application under the Freedom of Information Act for. That is completely false. Sections 7, 8, and 9 establish, particularize the type of information is required to be published.

If you want records, for example, as a police officer who has been jumped over for promotion and you want to use the Freedom of Information Act to get access to documents that would exist in the administrative department to see, that is not covered here. So what accessibility via application are you talking about? This, population of Trinidad and Tobago, these are the things why we listen carefully as they continue in their quest to mislead the population. This changes absolutely nothing to do with a freedom of information application.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Young SC: Again, playing smart with foolishness. The Bill does not abolish newspaper publication. Sounds nice, but immediately it actually makes it

an option, as was admitted, taking it away from mandatory publication to an option now. “So, okay yuh doh abolish it.” You just sideline it and streamline in the direction that you want to go.

Spent a lot of time talking about the usefulness of websites and access to information. This sounds good, but as we have demonstrated, there is a serious concern with information on websites. One, being completely wiped. Two, being manipulated and changed after the fact, especially with these statements. There is a concern with that. And three, it is clear that information, government information, and a Minister would not know about it, because a Minister is not in charge of a website. A Minister does not necessarily know what is being put up on his or her Ministry’s website, what is actually being updated on the website.

So again, to the Minister piloting this Bill, perhaps provide as best as he can, and he is the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, so he can put things into place, provide some sort of assurance to the population that in the implementation of this, it will be somewhere that is, as you say, “easily accessible”. What does that mean? I think we should properly define that to say, for example, one government portal that will contain all of the information. One can go, they can click on an index, they could see the information for whatever entity, Ministry, or public body it is, as opposed to going all over the place to try and find that particular report that is required.

So, try and narrow, or properly define, where it is required to be published.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member, you have two more minutes of original time. Do you require 15 minutes?

Mr. S. Young SC: Yes, please. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Hopefully not use it.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. S. Young SC: Thank you. The Member talked about the agility to respond to technological changes. Nice sounding language, but we have to make sure that the information is updated.

This one I smile at. “A website is excellent for permanency”, theoretically, but as I said a short while ago, very many Ministries, very many state enterprises have had post-May 2025, 10 years wiped out as though they did not exist, of government work and what was done and no longer exist on those websites. So do not come here and try to fool the population about permanency.

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

Mr. S. Young SC: So—“Yuh always start ’bout that central block. That central block that was supposed to be opened in July.” So, Madam Deputy Speaker, our concerns have been articulated. We support the aim and the objective of digitization. We support the addition of the use of websites. We have concerns as to what are “publicly accessible websites”, because that is as broad as you could get. It means it could be published on the World Wide Web, which makes it more difficult.

Because as I said at the outset, and why I set out the context of the policy behind the Freedom of Information Act, it is to make information easily accessible. And maybe that is where they got those words from, but of course implementing it in the wrong way, poor drafting as usual, to make information accessible to all citizens who want to find these reports, et cetera. And we have a real fear and concern that that is going to be diluted.

Also, we ask, give consideration that rather than make it an immediate option, make it an addition at this stage. Newspaper and a properly defined

website where the information can be found.

2.45 p.m.

Additionally, Madam Deputy Speaker—just one second. Additionally, give some consideration, as I was saying, as to the accessibility, because not every person and not every, as I was trying to explain, segment, especially particularized by age and also sometimes by vulnerabilities, not all our citizens are going to have that access. There are some who are just averse to this modern-day technology and look forward to the newspaper and well, the *Gazette*—I think actually, ironically, since the *Gazette* is now being published and updated on the Internet and it is more accessible there, I have found that more and more people are utilizing it and accessing the information there. So maybe that is the right place to park it. Maybe consider having the Government Printery or some particular Ministry publish all of this information.

So, Madam Deputy Speaker, it is a short Bill but potentially very consequential innocuous appearances of amendments but far-reaching consequences. Having said that, I go back to where I started at the outset to say that we support digitization and the advancement and the use of technology, especially where it is going to provide advantages to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. And I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Claxton Bay.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Tertiary Education and Skills Training (Mr. Hansen Narinesingh): Madam Deputy Speaker, it is with a profound sense of humility, responsibility and duty that I rise to address this august

House. At the outset, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the hon. Prime Minister for reposing her confidence and faith in me.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: I do not take that confidence lightly. It carries with it a certain level of integrity, diligence and unwavering commitment, not only to the Government, but to the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: I also want to place on the record my deepest appreciation to the people of Claxton Bay who placed their trust, confidence and faith in me to represent their interests in this honourable House. It is in this spirit of service and responsibility, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I make my contribution to the Freedom of Information (Amdt.) Bill. But before I get into my substantive contribution, I would just like to make a few comments on what the last speaker uttered.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Apparently, there is an obsession with profits from the media—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh:—you know, and in trying to balance a website against a newspaper, there seems to be a real obsession. But what really got me, Madam Deputy Speaker, was this changing and wiping out of government websites in such a clandestine manner. In the first place, you have to have something on the website to be proud of to wipe out.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: If there are no achievements, what is there to put on the

website?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: I also want to look at what he looked at in terms of the OPR publications, and what we have found is that in terms of the OPR publications, in looking at the OPR Annual Report, in 2023, during their tenure, 120 out of 288 enterprises were not compliant.

Hon. Members: “Wowww”.

Mr. H. Narinesingh: That is in 2023. Madam Deputy Speaker, in 2024, 178 out of 244 state enterprises were also compliant. Shame, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to come here and talk about non-compliance. But, Madam Deputy Speaker, let me go on to the substantive matter at hand.

Access to public information is a fundamental pillar of democratic governance. It strengthens transparency, supports accountability between citizens and public bodies, and empowers citizens to participate meaningfully in public life.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I am reminded of Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *The Social Contract*, where he examined the reciprocal relationship between the State and the citizen through the concept of the general will. Rousseau reminds us that democratic legitimacy rests not merely on authority to govern but on meaningful participation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: And meaningful participation requires and informs citizenry. Citizens have to access information that is necessary to understand, question and scrutinize the exercise of public power.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Madam Deputy Speaker, the Freedom of Information Act

was enacted a mere two decades ago, at a time when government communicated with citizens in an informational environment that was fundamentally different to the digital space in which we operate today. At that time, it was expedient that the legislation contemplated traditional methods of publication, including the *Gazette* and the newspaper. However, we cannot be ignorant of the fact that in this third decade of the 21st Century, digital penetration has changed the world substantially.

Today, reaching for your mobile phone has become second nature. Many citizens do this the first thing in the morning. Some of us parliamentarians also do it first thing in the morning when we want to watch our Facebook profiles and see the myriad of comments that we get from our constituents. We pay our bills. We check our bank balances. Some of us may have more bank balances than others. Well, I said, we watch our profile. We are able to conduct business, communicate with public authorities and access essential services online. The reality, therefore, is that when the average citizen seeks information today, their first port of call is the Internet.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: But, Madam Deputy Speaker, before I go into the specific amendments before this House, it is important that we first place said amendments within the context and purpose of the parent legislation, which is the Freedom of Information Act, Chap. 22:02 of 1999.

The parent Act establishes an important framework for openness and accountability in public administration. At its core is the principle that citizens should have reasonable access to information and the exercise of public power. Indeed, section 3 of the parent legislation makes this purpose clear, and I quote from section 3. Section 3(1) states:

“The object of this Act is to extend the right of members of the public to access...

“(a) making available to the public information about the operations of public authorities and, in particular, ensuring that the authorisations, policies, rules and practices affecting members of the public in their dealings with public authorities...

b) creating a general right of access to information in documentary form in the possession of public authorities limited only by exceptions and exemptions necessary...”

Madam Deputy Speaker, this is a paramount and critical starting point for this debate. The parent legislation therefore is not simply about obtaining documents. It establishes a broader framework of transparency, accountability and informed public participation while, at the same time, recognizing that there are legitimate circumstances in which certain information must remain protected. That context is particularly important today because the Bill before this House does not speak to dismantling or diminishing these fundamental principles. In fact, the Freedom of Information (Amdt.) Bill seeks to modernize the mechanisms through which certain publication obligations under the parent legislation must be fulfilled. In other words, the principle established by the parent Act remains intact.

But there is a deeper philosophical principle at the heart of this legislation. Those of us who are practitioners or students of law and legal theory would be familiar with the work of two philosophers in particular. And I always like to underpin my arguments by some level of theory because if you do not have a theory, if you do not have a substantive underpinning, then you do not know where you are going in practice.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Some of us would be familiar with Ronald Dworkin, who advanced the principle that rights must be taken seriously and every citizen is entitled to equal concern and respect under the law. Madam Deputy Speaker, I also want to recognize and pay tribute to one Jeremy Bentham, who recognized the profound importance of publicity in public affairs, famously holding that publicity is the very soul of justice. His philosophy recognizes the fundamental principle of accountable government, where the exercise of authority is open to public scrutiny. Those entrusted with public power are themselves subject to greater accountability.

These principles, Madam Deputy Speaker, are relevant to the freedom of information. Access to information is not merely an administrative process. It enables citizens to participate meaningfully in democratic life, scrutinize public authority and hold institutions accountable. Therefore, modernizing this method of publication must never mean diminishing access. We are not diminishing access.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: The medium may change, the technology may change, but the democratic principles must remain.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: The true test of these amendments is whether access to public information is preserved and strengthened.

Madam Deputy Speaker, under the existing provisions being amended, certain statements and information of public authorities are required to be published in the daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago. The Bill therefore introduces an alternative, it does not replace it. And the semantics of “and/or” that we have been hearing, all right, is a moot point.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: The Bill introduces and it modernizes, and what is modernized is reflected across sections 7, 8, and 9 of the Act and Regulation 3(1)(b) of the Freedom of Information (Publication of Arrangements) Regulations. This is an important distinction.

3.00 p.m.

The Bill does not abolish publication, it broadens and expands the lawful means by which publications may occur. It introduces flexibility by preserving the statutory obligation to make information public.

Madam Deputy Speaker sections 7, 8 and 9 publish important proactive publication obligations. But there is a deeper significance. At the conceptual level, the three sections perform different but interconnected functions. Section 7 is about institutional transparency. It requires the public authority to tell the citizen who we are, what we do, what documents we hold, how you can access them, and who is responsible for dealing with your requests. This is profoundly important because a statutory right means little if the citizen does not know where the information resides or how the machinery of government is organized.

Section 8 is about documentary transparency. It deals with documents made available for inspection or purpose. Its deeper purpose is to make the documentary sources of government more visible and accessible, rather than leaving citizens unaware of what is already available to them. Section 9 is particularly important from the standpoint of accountable decision-making. It concerns rules, principles, policies, guidelines and practices used by public authorities in making decisions or recommendations affecting members of the public. In democratic terms, that matters enormously. Citizens should not merely know what Government decided,

where the Act requires publication. They should be able to understand the framework of rules and policies by which public power is exercised.

Madam Deputy Speaker, having examined the substance of sections 7, 8 and 9, it is useful to place these amendments in a wider international context. Trinidad and Tobago is not alone in recognizing that public access to information must evolve alongside technology. Other jurisdictions have already incorporated electronic publication into their freedom of information frameworks. One such jurisdiction is New Zealand. And section 20(2A) of the New Zealand Official Information Act 1982, as amended, permits its:

“...Ministry of Justice...”—to—“publish a new edition or supplementary material on an Internet website and in an electronic form that is publicly accessible (at all reasonable times).”

Importantly, that provision also recognizes that other methods and formats of publication may remain necessary to meet the needs of members of the public. The New Zealand approach, therefore, does not treat online publication as a complete rejection of traditional methods. Instead, it recognizes the Internet as an additional and effective means of making official information more readily available to the public.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this demonstrates that the measure before this House is neither novel nor unprecedented. We are following an established international practice towards greater digital access to public information. We may not be the first jurisdiction to take the step, and we certainly will not be the last. However, this UNC Government is being proactive in ensuring that our legislation keeps pace with the realities of society it is intended to serve.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: The Freedom of Information Act already provides significant benefits to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. It enables members of the public to obtain specified documents from public authorities, and in doing so promotes accountability, transparency and greater public confidence in the institutions of the State that we now control. By permitting the information identified in sections 7, 8 and 9, in particular, together with the relevant information under the regulations, to be published on publicly accessible websites, we are strengthening those benefits. We are making that information easier to locate, easier to access and available to a wider cross-section of our population.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: But Madam Deputy Speaker, we could also find some support for this in our own legislative history. There are amendments to the Sexual Offences Act, Chap. 11:28, which provided for the establishment of a public sex offender website. That legislation contemplated a website through the control of the Commissioner of Police to which specified information could be made accessible to the public. The underlying principle, therefore, is simple. Our Parliament has previously recognized that publicly accessible websites can serve as a legitimate effective means of disseminating information in the public interest.

Madam Deputy Speaker, our courts have also played an important role in shaping the principles that underpin the Freedom of Information Act. Over the years, the jurisprudence has consistently reinforced a central principle. The Act should operate in a manner that facilitates meaningful access to information held by public authorities. Madam Deputy Speaker, as an attorney myself, it is not lost on me the significance that the Freedom of Information Act holds. Our jurisprudence over the years and many court matters have consistently moved

towards ensuring that the right of access is meaningful, that public authorities take their statutory responsibility seriously and that limitations upon disclosure are properly justified. That is precisely why this amendment must be properly understood. We are not removing the obligations, we are not diminishing the principle of public access, and we are certainly not weakening the freedom of information framework. What we are doing is modernizing the mechanism through which those publication obligations may be discharged. The duty remains, the principle remains, the accountability remains. What changes is simply the media.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a properly maintained publicly accessible website can allow information to remain available beyond a single publication date, to be searched when the citizen requires it and to be accessed at their fingertips. Therefore, the evolution of our jurisprudence, and the evolution of technology, points us in the same direction, not towards less transparency, but towards more effective transparency. The objective must remain meaningful public access.

There is also, Madam Deputy Speaker, the fiscal dimension, where using existing frameworks, public authorities incur higher recurring costs in respect to annual publication to ensure that they are acting in compliance with the FOIA. This Bill introduces a cost-conscious alternative by providing greater access to taxpayers' dollars, it is reasonable to avoid the recurrent newspaper publication expenditure.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: "We cutting profits, dais the problem." I also, Madam Deputy Speaker, respectfully disagree with the argument that newspaper

publication automatically produces greater public awareness by properly designed digital duplication is somehow less effective. That criticism assumes that publication in the newspaper necessarily means that information has been seen, read and understood. But Madam Deputy Speaker, publication and public awareness are not the same thing.

A notice appearing on a particular day does not guarantee that the average citizen will see it, locate it or even recognize its relevance. By contrast, Madam Deputy Speaker, a properly implemented digital publication can keep public information continuously available and searchable long after its initial publication.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: A properly designed digital system can permit searches by public authority, searches by subject matter, you can search by date or even by keyword, instead of requiring someone to search through individual newspaper editions. That is the most cumbersome and time-consuming. More fundamentally, Madam Deputy Speaker, replacing a mandatory newspaper publication requirement must not be confused with eliminating publication. The issue is not whether Government should publish, the issue is how should Government publish effectively and efficiently. Digitization must never become a mechanism for concealment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, ultimately this amendment is about the people. It is about ensuring that government does not become distant from the people that it was elected to serve. Madam Deputy Speaker, this Government believes that better days are ahead for the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: And that those better days must be built upon a government

that is accessible, that is responsive and accountable to the people it serves. This amendment reflects that commitment. The hon. Prime Minister has repeatedly emphasized a fundamental principle of public service. Government must serve the people and that we must reach the people.

Madam Deputy Speaker, in closing, I am reminded of a seminal quote or phrase by Abraham Lincoln in his famous Gettysburg Address of 1863.

“...government of the people, by the people and for the people...”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: I just want to repeat that,

“...government of the people, by the people and for the people, shall not perish from this earth.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Narinesingh: Madam Deputy Speaker, with those few words, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Malabar/Mausica.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Dominic Romain (Malabar/Mausica): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to make a brief intervention—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Romain: “Ahh, you have dat kind ah list.” Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you for the opportunity to make a brief intervention in this debate. Permit me to start, just to comment on something that the last speaker said just before he wrapped up. He said, “brighter days or better days are here”. But you know I recall, just a couple months ago, I think everybody in the Government stood in front of the Parliament building to take a picture and said, “brighter days are here”.

So we went, “here”, “ahead”, which is it? I am confused. It is either, it is here or it is ahead. You all cannot make up your mind which is why credibility is an issue with this Government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: Madam Deputy Speaker, my colleague for Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West said, this legislation on the surface is quite laudable, but if it is one thing we on this side have learned since this new Parliament has convened, is that when we seek to scrutinize legislation brought by this Government, a fine-tooth comb, a pound of salt and a magnifying glass show themselves to be very helpful implements. We just cannot take this Government for the surface. Because they have a habit of making promises regarding the legislation and what it will do, versus what it actually does and we could give examples of some pieces of legislation. The grandparents Act, the fireworks Act, stand your ground legislation, almost every Finance Bill, the budget, mid-year review. So, we have to question the sincerity of this legislation.

3.15 p.m.

Now, the mover of the Bill, as well as the last speaker, would have focused a lot on pronouncing that we are not abolishing the use of the newspaper; we are simply providing additional options. And while it is they may not be seeking to abolish it legislatively, they may be doing it tactfully, Madam Deputy Speaker, because it is not lost on us, and we recall that one of the first acts of this Government when they came into office last year was to implement a freeze on advertising. Yeah, you all probably forgot that, but let me remind you.

On the 16th of May last year—and I am reading here, Madam Deputy Speaker, with your permission, from an entity called Reporters Without Borders:

“Trinidad and Tobago: Government advertising freeze compounds crisis facing independent journalism.”

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Romain:

“Reporters Without Borders (RSF) is concerned by the Trinidad and Tobago government’s...”—

Mr. de Nobriga: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 53(1)(e), (f) and (g). We have been going very good so far. I am seeing the Government is starting to—

Dr. Moonilal: Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise on Standing Order 48(1).

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will allow the Member to continue.

Mr. D. Romain: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

“Reporters Without Borders is concerned by the Trinidad and Tobago government’s suspension of public advertising contracts with news outlets as the country’s independent media faces growing financial strain.”

It has nothing to do with profits, as proffered by the last speaker.

“Since the policy was announced in May 2025, one national daily newspaper has closed, and another has announced layoffs in its newsroom—in a country with only three newspapers.”

So, even if it is that you have to advertise in the newspapers, at that time we had three; now we have two. So, when we are talking about expenditure as it pertains to providing the public with information, in particular Members of the public who may not necessarily be inclined to use social media or to use online publications to

be able to access information—two newspapers, come on.

“The continued loss of government advertising risks further weakening independent journalism and media pluralism in one of the Caribbean’s strongest press freedom environments.

Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar placed advertising by Government ministries and state enterprises on mainstream and social media—broadcast, print and digital—‘on hold until further notice’...”

Now, I did not see anywhere that it was advertised that that hold was lifted. Perhaps it was, and maybe I missed it because it was not published in the newspaper. See the value of publishing in the newspaper? But that seems to be lost on Members opposite, Madam Deputy Speaker.

And this particular amendment that is before us, we are simply asking: What is the issue with keeping the law as it is, making it mandatory to advertise in the newspaper? But there is nothing stopping Government agencies from advertising or publishing information online, as my colleague from Port of Spain North/St. Ann’s West would have mentioned. What is the issue with making it “and”? But instead, we have what they call—let me see if I get the legal term here correct, because I am no attorney—a disjunctive provision, as used by Sen. Gibbings in his contribution in the other place. Making it optional, Madam Deputy Speaker.

And I ask the question: Since it is an option, as they say, so we are not abolishing it, but it is just an additional option available to public bodies, who determines which option is used? What are the criteria? What informs the decision as to whether we are going to publish online or in the newspaper?

Now, we on this side are inclined to believe that the focus will be more on online, because this is an administration that, even when they were in Opposition,

used to attack the local media, labelling media houses “Sabga media”, “PNM media”, and calling for boycotts of these various media houses. We have a Minister of Government who, every morning when he is having his doubles and coffee, seems to have an issue with media houses, has the worst to say about the media houses, that they are biased and so on, and seeking to discourage Members of the public from trusting the information that comes from these media houses.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Romain: That is your perspective. So, again, I ask the question: Who determines, Madam Deputy Speaker, which medium is going to be used? And we heard a lot about the *Gazette*, and that is very good. But if it is that you are going to be promoting an amendment such as this, where you are giving public bodies the opportunity or the option to decide whether or not they are going to publish in the newspapers where—and I would like to let Members opposite know—people still read newspapers, people still buy newspapers. Maybe you all abandoned them because you figured the media houses are PNM.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Romain: Aye, aye, look, look, look, they have one there. “Yuh see.” Useful. Why not look at it online? You have your phone in your hand.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Romain: Right, but you see the value of having the hard copy?

Hon. Member: Noooo .

Mr. D. Romain: Because, Madam Deputy Speaker, there are still a lot of citizens who prefer to use the hard copy. They pick up a newspaper, you are going through, you happen to see the financials for First Citizens Bank. You would not have thought to go and look, because maybe most people do not know when First

Citizens' financial year-end is, but I just happened to be going through and I see, "Wow, let me take a look at this. Let me see how much money First Citizens Bank has lost as a result of the asset levy that the Government would have imposed." And they have indicated that they lost money; they are seeing a decline in profits because of that. But—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

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

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Yes, please remain relevant, Member. Stick to the clauses of the Bill only. Thank you.

Mr. D. Romain: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I was just citing an example, right, of how people would access information, because most people are not going to go online to say, "Let me look for First Citizens, or any other bank, or any other Government agency for that matter, their financials," right? But you happen upon it while you are reading the newspaper, which is common. But I move on.

I will give an example, Madam Deputy Speaker. Mention was also made by both speakers on the Government side with respect to the availability of information on websites of public bodies. If I may give an example, Madam Deputy Speaker, a Government company called Landmark TT. I am visiting their website right now, right.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Mr. D. Romain: This company was incorporated six, seven months ago, yet still their website is woefully inadequate. You look under "About Us": "Coming Soon"; "Directors": "Coming Soon"; "Notices"— All you have is, well,

Landmark TT. It tells you where they are located and their contact number, but that is about it, no notice. “Contact Us”, the same thing. That is all. But there is nothing much else on this particular website of this significant state company that has responsibility for significant projects and has been featuring prominently, as lately as last night, on the evening news, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker, if it is that we are going to be implementing something such as what is being proposed today, we need to make sure that the infrastructure is in place to allow for easy access. I can tell you, based on my own experience in trying to navigate even the website of the Parliament, looking for certain reports, it is a bit difficult. If it is that your wording in the search bar is not precise, you are not going to get through. The same applies—I will give you an example—to the Central Bank. You are looking for certain information, certain reports; again, when you use the search bar, if the wording that you are putting is not precise, you are going to have difficulty in navigating these particular sites.

Whereas, if the information is available—and we are not saying that it should not be—but provide that as a failsafe mechanism, Madam Deputy Speaker. Because we still have persons who have smartphones and do not know how to use the smartphones. They are not familiar with a lot of the facilities or a lot of the features of the phone. Most people use it to make a call, take a call, WhatsApp, and they scroll through social media, but that is about it, Madam Deputy Speaker.

So, we are saying, if it is that you want to propose this—and again, we said it is a laudable initiative—but the infrastructure needs to be in place so that it is easy for persons to be able to use it. There is the issue of digital literacy, which ties into that previous point as well. Access to the Internet is another issue that we have to look at.

Newspaper archives. Prior to me becoming a Member of Parliament, Madam Deputy Speaker, when I was a radio talk show host, oftentimes wanting to discuss certain issues—once, I am not on radio anymore, traditional radio. Madam Deputy Speaker, so there would have been topics that I wished to discuss, and trying to find information online would have proven difficult. Sometimes you pull up a link to the newspaper, the digital newspaper, and you get the 404 error message, or it is telling you that this information is no longer available. So, I would have had to actually go to the newspaper, to their headquarters, to enquire of their archives, and they were able to print out the story for me so that I was able to get that information. So, there is that benefit to having this information published in the newspaper.

Now, the Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development, the mover of the amendment, spoke about embracing other media. And that is good. You could embrace other media, but that does not mean that we have to throw the baby out with the bathwater, Madam Deputy Speaker. Madam Deputy Speaker, the last speaker for the Government spoke a lot about “for the people, by the people and of the people”. We listen to the people. Permit me, Madam Deputy Speaker, just to quote from an opinion that was published in the newspaper by someone who is one of the people, not “our people”, as mentioned by Members opposite.

Mr. Birchwood: Our people. Our people.

Mr. D. Romain: Our people, yeah. The article is entitled—and it was dated September 13th, 2026—and the opinion that is being proffered: “Reject FOI Amendment Bill”. And this is from a member of the public who is expressing concerns with what this particular amendment could do, based on his

understanding.

He says that:

“There appears to be a troubling new tendency to justify almost every government decision by”—putting or“—pointing to how many dollars can be saved— or how much revenue can be generated, how many dollars can be saved. But not everything of value can, or should, be reduced to a balance sheet.

This is a member of the public saying this, and if it is we are listening to “for the people” and “by the people” and so on, let us listen to this:

“Democracy has costs. Transparency has costs. Accountability has costs. They are not wasteful expenditures; they are investments in good governance.

Putting official notices online does not automatically make them more accessible. Citizens should not have to know which government website to visit, navigate changing portals or search through pages of information simply to discover what their government is required to disclose. Broken links, outdated websites and the digital divide could easily turn information that is technically public into information that is practically hidden.

Newspapers provide a predictable, visible and independently accessible public record. They also give journalists, citizens and civil society an opportunity to see information they might never think to search for online.

And there is another cost that appears absent from the Government’s calculation: weakening the financial foundation of traditional media diminishes the resources available for professional journalism—the very journalism that scrutinises Government and holds public officials to

account.”

Mr. Sturge: [*Interruption*]

Mr. D. Romain: That is correct. The views of a member of the public, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I also want to just touch quickly again on the issue of the *Gazette*, and if it is that we are going to be relying on the *Gazette* more now, I am saying that we need to be able to promote that. I think that there are still a lot of citizens who may not know how to access it. Clear examples of that, Madam Deputy Speaker, would be two pieces of legislation, I may say, that this Government would have introduced since coming into office. We know last year the gazetting of the increase in fines, traffic fines, was published in the *Gazette*, and when we on this side said it came as a thief in the night, I recall the Minister of Transportation and Civil Aviation when he came here to defend it, said it was—

3.30 p.m.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Deputy Speaker, 48(1), please.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Once more, Member, please stay on course.

Mr. D. Romain: I would expect that the Member for Barataria/San Juan should understand the linkage that I am making.

Madam Deputy Speaker: But please stay relevant, thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: We are speaking here; the word *Gazette* was mentioned many times. And the publication of information in the *Gazette* was mentioned by both speakers opposite as a viable option, an opportunity. So, even if it is that you missed the publication, you are not inclined to go on our website to look for a particular website; you go to the *Gazette*. And I am making the point. I said we

need to be able to promote the *Gazette*, especially for those persons who may not be familiar with how you access it. And I was making the point that even when things are published in the *Gazette*, it may still be a challenge for some persons. And I gave the example of the legislation as it pertains to the increase in fines—it was published in the *Gazette*, but yet still many citizens were not aware of it. And it only came to light when the Member for Arouca/Lopinot would have raised it on social media. And even the traditional media journalist only picked it up after he, the Member for Arouca/Lopinot would have raised it.

Mr. Des Vignes: Correct.

Mr. D. Romain: So, even though it was published there, it still was not accessible to, well, it was accessible, but persons were not inclined to access it. And that is the point that we are making. That if it is that you are going to be promoting these things, you need to ensure that the infrastructure is in there.

Then we had the issue quite recently of WASA and the increase in fees for certain services. Again, the public only became aware of it, even though it was gazetted, when the Member for Arouca/Lopinot highlighted it on social media. So, we are saying that there is a need to preserve what currently exists. And we are not saying this is bad. Again, we said that it is laudable. But the point that we are making is that the disjunctive provision “of/or” now creating an option. So, you are removing an obligation and giving an option.

Dr. Moonilal: That is not tedious repetition?

Mr. D. Romain: And if it is, again, making the point, that if government bodies have a choice to make between publishing in the newspaper and publishing online, and as the Minister would have mentioned, where it is that a particular Ministry might be strapped for cash, obviously they are going to choose the online option as

opposed to the newspaper. And we are not making a case here for any newspaper and their profits. We just want to make sure that members of the public have full access to all of the information, regardless of what their medium of choice may be, Madam Deputy Speaker. And it serves a useful purpose, particularly for those of us who, as a Member for Barataria/San Juan, often reminds us that we get a monthly subvention to pay researchers or a research officer. And sometimes the hard copy serves well.

Mr. Hosein: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. Sturge: “And yuh doh use it.”

Mr. D. Romain: “Yuh doh use it?” Sometimes, listening to the contributions opposite, I am inclined to believe that. But Madam Deputy Speaker, as I said, I just wanted to make a brief intervention, and hopefully Members opposite will take some of the points that were made, take it in stride.

Dr. Moonilal: “But yuh ain’t make no point yet.”

Mr. Kesar: I beg to move.

Mr. D. Romain: To summarize—

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mr. D. Romain:—because apparently they are having a little challenge over there today, Madam Deputy Speaker. We on this side are not inclined, Madam Deputy Speaker, to get up and read ChatGPT speeches, right.

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

Mr. D. Romain: Coming with platitudes and so on. That is all, but “for the people, by the people, of the people”. That is great. That is wonderful.

Ms. Mohit: Keep saying it.

Mr. D. Romain: But—

Mr. Hosein: “Oh God, give we ah lil ease up nah.”

Mr. D. Romain: “Well, is alyuh saying dat. We speak for the people. We have the privilege, Madam Deputy Speaker, to give voice to the concerns of members of the public.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. D. Romain: And just as Members opposite mentioned, they kind of get a feel of what the public sentiment is by reading comments on Facebook. We do the same thing too.

Mr. Hosein: [*Inaudible*]

Mr. D. Romain: Yeah? I can tell you. That video with the Minister of Energy—
? Those comments were not good at all. “It didn’t look good for him, nah.”

Mr. Birchwood: At all

Mr. D. Romain: It did not look good at all.

Mr. Birchwood: At all, at all.

Mr. Hosein: Let us get back to the Bill.

Mr. D. Romain: Yes, let us get back to it. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, again, we are just asking the Government for consideration, right. The “and/or”, there is nothing wrong with making it that. You publish in the *Gazette*, you publish in the newspaper, an obligation. But if you want to publish online, no problem, go right ahead. It expands the options, and I am sure the public will be eternally grateful for that. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, with those few words, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

The Parliamentary Secretary in the Ministry of Public Utilities (Mrs. Shivanna Sam): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for recognizing me and for the opportunity to contribute to this debate on the Freedom of Information (Amdt.) Bill, 2026. At first glance, Madam Deputy Speaker, this is a short Bill. It contains two clauses. Its operative provision replaces a few words in sections 7, 8, and 9 of the Freedom of Information Act and in one regulation. But Parliament should never confuse a short Bill with an insignificant Bill. Sometimes the clearest amendments are the ones that remove an outdated obstacle without disturbing the right that the law was created to protect.

Mr. Elder: “Allyuh listening?”

Mrs. S. Sam: Madam Deputy Speaker, this amendment is not a retreat from transparency, but rather, transparency catching up to 2026. We are not weakening the Freedom of Information Act. We are dragging its filing cabinet into the digital age.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. S. Sam: Madam Deputy Speaker, this Bill is about where citizens should be able to find public information in 2026. It asks a practical question. Must every public authority continue paying to reproduce its annual public statements in a daily newspaper even where that authority can place this same statement on a publicly accessible website, keep it available, make it searchable, and permit citizens to reach it from their homes, workplaces, schools, and communities?

This Government’s answer is sensible because this is a sensible government.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: Correct.

Mrs. S. Sam: The *Gazette* remains mandatory, but the second channel becomes a

choice between a daily newspaper and a publicly accessible website.

Mr. Elder: This is a sensible contribution.

Mrs. S. Sam: Madam Deputy Speaker, that is the Bill. It does not abolish the Freedom of Information Act. It does not narrow the general right of access under section 11. It does not create a new exemption. It does not protect Cabinet documents beyond what the present Act already provides. It does not interfere with the Ombudsman's review jurisdiction or the right to seek judicial review. It does not remove the obligation to publish. Instead, it modernizes one method by which publication must occur. And that distinction is important, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Under the existing law, the statements are published in the *Gazette* and in a daily newspaper. Clause 2 retains the *Gazette* and creates a choice for the second channel. And I heard the Member for Malabar/Mausica go on and on about phasing out newspapers, but that is not what this amendment is about. You still have the option to publish in a newspaper.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. S. Sam: The duty remains. Only the lawful method is widened. Madam Deputy Speaker, this Bill respects the original purpose of our Freedom of Information Act while allowing that purpose to be fulfilled in the world in which our people now live. Section 3 says that information concerning public authorities must be readily available. It also directs that the Act be interpreted to facilitate and promote prompt disclosure—"...at the lowest reasonable cost...". Those are not decorative words, Madam Deputy Speaker. Readiness, promptness, and reasonable cost are part of the statutory design.

A publication rule written for the media habits of the year 2000 should not

be frozen forever if a more accessible and durable method is now available. When the Act was enacted, Madam Deputy Speaker, a daily newspaper was then one of the most reliable means of placing information before the public. That historical choice made sense. But a newspaper notice is tied to a particular edition and a particular day. If a citizen misses that edition, that citizen may have to locate an archive, travel to a library, contact the newspaper, or search through all the physical copies.

The Act was written in 1999. In 1999, we were using dial-up internet connection and hoping that nobody picked up the house phone. It is time the law caught up with the century we are now actually living in. Technology and the way we get information have revolutionized since the '90s. An official website can keep the same statement available every day at every hour and can allow the citizen to search within it, download it, share it, and compare it with the previous year's statement.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the words “publicly accessible website” are important because they describe a public means of publication, not an internal government system. The amendment recognizes an official website as a legitimate place for citizens to obtain statutory information. The former administration had 10 years in office, while digital communication became part of ordinary life. Yet they never made this simple correction. They had the technology before them, the legislation before them, and the time to execute, but clearly what they lacked was the idea.

Mr. Hosein: Incompetence.

Mrs. S. Sam: This Bill also creates an opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker, not only to save the cost of newspaper publication where an authority chooses the

website option, but to raise the quality of proactive disclosure. A searchable annual statement can tell a citizen what the authority does, what categories of documents it holds, what policies and manuals guide its decisions, who receives freedom of information requests, and where relevant documents can be inspected or obtained. That citizen may not need to file a formal request at all.

Good proactive publication reduces uncertainty before it becomes an application, a complaint, or litigation. And Madam Deputy Speaker, that is especially important for rural communities like mine, such as Cumuto/Manzanilla. A constituent should not have to travel from Fishing Pond, Biche, or Manzanilla to Port of Spain to merely discover the name of a designated officer or the procedure for requesting an official document. Information published online can reduce the distance between the citizen and the State. Geography should not decide whose rights are convenient to exercise.

At the same time, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will not pretend that every person has equal connectivity, equal digital confidence, or equal access to a suitable device. The International Telecommunication Union reports that 84.1 per cent of individuals in Trinidad and Tobago use the internet in 2024. That is a strong base for digital access. But it also tells us that digital exclusion has not disappeared, and we recognize that. Older persons, person with disabilities, low-income households, and residents in areas with weak service must remain part of our thinking. And that is one reason why the Bill's structure is measured rather than reckless. The *Gazette* remains, newspapers remain available as an option, and the underlying rights of request, assistance, and inspection remain untouched.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this is consistent with the people-centred vision of our Prime Minister, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC. Her public life has moved

through education, law, local government, and national leadership. She understands that Government must meet citizens where they are. Her vision is not technology for appearances' sake. It is the use of modern tools to reduce inconvenience, widen opportunity and make public administration more responsive. This amendment is a modest but practical expression of that philosophy.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the amendment appears in several operational locations for a reason. Section 7 concerns information about the organization and functions of public authorities, categories of documents, available material, request procedures, designated officers, advisory bodies and public reading rooms.

3.45p.m.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the amendment appears in several operational locations for a reason. Section 7 concerns information about the organization and functions of public authorities, categories of documents, available material, request procedures, designated officers, advisory bodies and public reading rooms. Section 8 concerns documents used to guide decisions, recommendations, advice and enforcement affecting rights, benefits, obligations and penalties. Section 9 concerns reports, advice, recommendations and certain records of decisions. Regulation 3 concerns published arrangements, identifying who may make decisions under the Act. Consistency across those provisions prevents a patchwork. If the Government amended section 7 alone, Madam Deputy Speaker, one class of annual statements could go online, while related indices and notices remain tied to a newspaper publication. That would be incomplete reform.

Clause 2 aligns the connected provisions so that the same modern publication approach applies throughout Part II and the relevant regulation.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a short Bill can still be carefully designed, something that the Opposition was unable to do.

Madam. Deputy Speaker, the words “publicly accessible” also answer any suggestion that publication may be hidden inside an internal system. The website contemplated by clause 2 must be accessible to the public. That language connects directly with section 3, which requires the Act to facilitate prompt disclosure at the lowest reasonable cost. There is a deeper distinction here between publication and publicity. A newspaper may offer valuable publicity on the day a notice appears. But a website can offer persistent publication. Each has its advantages. The Bill does not declare one medium universally superior, as the Opposition is trying to insinuate. It lets the responsible public authority choose the medium that best reaches the relevant public, while always preserving the *Gazette* as the official baseline.

An authority serving a population with limited connectivity may choose the newspaper. An authority with a heavily used website and digitally engaged users may choose online publication. That is administrative judgment within a continuing statutory duty. Madam Deputy Speaker, choice also permits better use of public money. Newspaper advertising is not free. Every dollar spent reproducing a long annual statement is a dollar that cannot be spent twice. Where publication on a publicly accessible website can satisfy the legal duty and reach the intended audience, the authority should be able to use that route.

This is not an attack on newspapers, as we have been hearing throughout this debate. This is not an attack on anyone. It is not an attack on newspapers. Newspapers remain essential to democracy and they remain expressly available under the Bill. It is a recognition that legislation should not

compel one commercial publication channel in every circumstance, regardless of cost to audience or technological change.

And, Madam Deputy Speaker, the savings are wider than the price of an advertisement. Newspaper placement involves formatting, procurement, processing and verification each time the recurring statement is published. Online publication uses infrastructure that public authorities already maintain and makes the resulting material capable of continued consultation. The former Government paid the recurring cost, accepted the recurring inconvenience and never questioned the recurring requirement. They were remarkably efficient at repeating inefficiency.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. S. Sam: Madam Deputy Speaker, transparency strengthens when compliance becomes more visible. A newspaper notice may, technically, satisfy the law, yet be difficult to locate six months later. A dated web page can remain visible and searchable. Archived annual statements allow citizens to compare what an authority publishes from one year to the next, whether its functions changed, whether the designated officer changed, whether new categories of documents were created, or whether inspection arrangements improved. Continuity turns isolated publication into institutional memory.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Commonwealth practice confirms that online publication is not a retreat from freedom of information. Australia's federal freedom of information framework includes an information publication scheme, requiring agencies to publish a broad range of information on their websites. The Office of the Australian Information Commissioner describes that information as:

“...a national resource...managed for public purposes.”

Agencies must publish plans, organizational information, operational information, consultation arrangements, contact details and routinely accessed material.

The Australian lesson, Madam Deputy Speaker, is not that every feature must be copied word for word. It is that proactive online publication has become a recognized part of a mature access to information system. Australia does not treat a government website as inherently less transparent than a paid newspaper notice. It treats website publication as a direct route by which citizens can understand agencies and obtain information without first making a request.

And the United Kingdom offers the same broad lesson, Madam Deputy Speaker. Section 19 of its Freedom of Information Act requires public authorities to adopt and maintain publication schemes. The Information Commissioner's model scheme commits authorities to make information routinely available, easily identified and accessible to review and update that information, and to publish data sets where required. The Commissioner's guidance recognizes that publication schemes are ordinarily made available through public authority websites. Madam Deputy Speaker, the United Kingdom confirms that website publication is now an ordinary part of freedom of information practice, not an experiment. Other Commonwealth countries have already travelled this road.

Jamaica's access to information system also provides material online through its Access to Information Unit, including legislation, guidance, forms and even youth-focused material. And that last point deserves attention, Madam Deputy Speaker. Access to information should not be presented as a specialist tool just for lawyers, journalists or politicians. Young citizens should understand it. If we want future generations to participate responsibly, we must modernize the legislation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. S. Sam: We must adapt in order to give reliable sources and teach our young people how public decisions can be examined. Madam Deputy Speaker, these Commonwealth comparisons reveal how far behind the former administration allowed our statute to fall. Digital publication has become an ordinary instrument of modern accountability across mature Commonwealth systems. Australia, the United Kingdom and Jamaica did not conclude that online access was hostile to transparency. They recognize that public information should travel by the channels citizens actually use. But the former Government watched the world modernize, and they mistook observation for leadership. So, they just sat and observed, and they did nothing.

Madam Deputy Speaker, let us also consider access for persons with disabilities. A printed newspaper notice has a fixed physical presentation. Digital information can be navigated by screen-reading software, enlarged without loss of clarity, displayed in high contrast and searched by a keyword. It can include headings and selectable text, rather than a scanned image. For some citizens, website publication is not merely more convenient, it is actually materially more accessible.

And, Madam Deputy Speaker, this amendment also respects the parent Act's own technological breadth. Section 4 of the Act defines documents to include information recorded by electronic means and machine-readable records. Electronic information is therefore not foreign to the statutory scheme. It has been contemplated within the Acts from the beginning. Clause 2, therefore, brings the public mechanism into closer alignment with that existing definition. It is a correction that was hiding in plain sight, which is probably why the former

administration missed it.

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Mrs. S. Sam: Madam Deputy Speaker, under the leadership of our Prime Minister, this Government is demonstrating that profound improvement does not always require a massive Bill. Sometimes it requires the intelligence to identify the exact obstruction and the political will to remove it. And that is what we did not have before, the political will. The Opposition possessed power without that insight, but this Government has now joined insight to action.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mrs. S. Sam: And the Opposition may continue debating the entire alphabet, Madam Deputy Speaker, but the grammar, the clause, the Explanatory Note, the information brief and the statutory purpose all say the same thing. The law presently demands *Gazette* and newspaper. The amended law will demand *Gazette* and either newspaper or publicly accessible website. Either or creates the choice. The surviving “and” preserves the *Gazette*, and no amount of political wordplay can make those changes disappear.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the principle is straightforward: A citizen should not lose practical access to public information merely because a particular newspaper was not purchased on a particular morning. The information must remain official and within reach. This Bill gives public authorities another lawful way to achieve that purpose, whilst preserving the *Gazette* and the rights contained in the Act. Madam Deputy Speaker, I am proud to be part of a government that is willing to update the law without weakening the right, and to use modern technology, while preserving accountability. Madam Deputy Speaker, *Gazette* it, post it and let the people actually find it. This is what modernizing transparency

looks like, not a retreat from the light, but switching on a brighter, more permanent one. And for those reasons, Madam Deputy Speaker, I support this Bill. And I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

STATEMENT BY MINISTER

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, we now revert to Statements by Ministers. I call on the Leader of the House.

The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath): Thank you kindly, Madam Deputy Speaker. Pursuant to Standing Order 126, and with your kind leave, there has been agreement to allow the hon. Prime Minister to speak until the conclusion of her statement.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I am informed that there has been an agreement between the Leader of the House and the Chief Whip to allow the hon. Prime Minister to speak until the conclusion of her statement. Hon. Prime Minister.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Special Operations Bill, 2026

(Expiration of Emergency Powers)

The Prime Minister (Hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar SC): Thankyou very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you, Members. I take this opportunity, Madam Deputy Speaker, to inform this honourable House, and by extension, the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, of another measure by my Government in the fight against violent crime. As we may recall, the SOE will end tomorrow—AG, I think at midnight on the 17th of September, tomorrow. That is when the constitutional

period expires. However, the responsibility of my Government to protect the people of Trinidad and Tobago does not end with the expiration of the SOE.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will not allow the expiration of the emergency powers to create an opportunity for gangs, gun runners and drug traffickers to regain ground. Therefore, following consultations with the National Security Council, my Government intends to bring the Special Operations Bill, 2026, before Parliament.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

4.00 p.m.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am advised, Madam Deputy Speaker, that this Special Operations Bill, 2026, has been laid in the Parliament and we will debate it on Friday the 18th of September at the House of Representatives.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The purpose of the Bill, Madam Deputy Speaker, will be to establish policing districts and provide a legal framework for targeted operations against violent crime, gang activity and illegal weapons. Every citizen has the right to live peacefully, operate a business without extortion and to be able to send their children to school without fear. No family should be driven from their home, and no geographic location should be surrendered to gangs and criminals. The State of Emergency, as I said, is ending tomorrow, and so through this Bill, this Special Operations Bill, 2026, we want to continue to fight to protect the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This Bill will provide the targeted framework

needed to continue to fight after the State of Emergency ends. The Bill will establish police in districts in which police officers may conduct special operations supported by the defence force when necessary.

The Commissioner of Police will be given the power to appoint a head of special operations for each district. In contrast, the Chief of Defence Staff will appoint a head of military assistance wherever defence force support is required. Where violent crime, gang activity or illegal weapons pose serious threats and under policing is insufficient, a defined area may be temporarily closed. Within that area, the authorities may establish cordons, impose curfews, regulate entry and departure, and exercise enhanced powers of search, seizure, arrest and detention subject to judicial oversight.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam Deputy Speaker, let me make it very clear. These measures will target criminals. They are not meant to punish law-abiding citizens.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: When gangs impose illegal curfews, extort businesses, recruit children and drive families from their homes, those gangs attempt to replace the authority of the State with the authority of the criminal gun. This Bill will give the protective services the lawful power to break that control, restore public safety and return these areas to the people who live there. The results of the six-month state of emergency approaching its conclusion demonstrate why this framework is necessary. According to the operational report declassified and released by my Government, as of day 191, 5,802 persons have been arrested, and 3,550 persons out of these have been charged. This represents a charge rate of

61.2 per cent.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Of those charged, 2,154 face serious crime charges including firearm and ammunition offences, for robbery, for general larceny, for breaking offences, for possession of narcotics for trafficking, for fraud, for sexual offences, for wounding or shooting, for home invasion, for murder and for kidnapping. A further 816 persons were charged with minor crimes and 582 with minor offences.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: These included 494 charges for possession of narcotics, and 79 for possession of drug apparatus. The report also recorded 801 applications for PDOs, of which 702 were approved, and 574 executed. Of those detained under the PDOs, 240 were subsequently charged—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC:—whilst other investigations continue and are continuing. Crime declined across every police division.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And the primary threat which led to the declaration of the SOE was substantially reduced.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: CNC3 and the Guardian subsequently reported these findings on September 13th and 14th of this year, 2026. Madam Deputy Speaker, these are not just numbers and statistics. They represent alleged firearm offenders, robbers, home invaders, kidnappers, and murder queues brought before the courts, and therefore give families greater protection from violent crimes. So,

let us not just look at them as numbers. These are real-life human beings who have been captured and who will face the courts of the land.

The proposed Special Operations Bill, 2026, will allow our protective services to preserve these gains through focused, accountable operations without relying upon a nationwide state of emergency. Preserving these gains that we achieved under the SOEs also requires us to confront the larger criminal economy sustaining the violence within these policing districts. Special operations must target not only the gunmen terrorizing residents, but they must also target the drugging, the weapons and the money supporting them.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: According to the TTPS, as reported by the *Guardian* on September 16, 2026, police and customs officers discovered 420 packages containing about 416.5 kilograms of cocaine at a warehouse in Longdenville. The drugs were valued at \$193.5 million. And they were concealed inside backhoe tyres. Days later, the Coast Guard intercepted a pirogue in the Huevos Island carrying 394 packages containing about 440.2 kilograms of cocaine valued at more than \$204.5 million. Four people have been arrested, according to reports carried in the media. Together, Madam Deputy Speaker, these operations removed approximately 856.7 kilograms of cocaine, worth almost \$398 million from the hands of criminals. As I told the media, and as reported today, our security services have seized approximately \$1 billion in illegal drugs since the UNC has been in power.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Let me repeat that, our security services have seized approximately \$1 billion in illegal drugs since my Government, the UNC,

has been in power.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Understand that no poor person or no small operator can finance shipments of this magnitude. No ordinary person, no small man, no small operator can finance shipments of this magnitude up to about \$1 billion. No, they cannot. They cannot. Behind the gunmen are wealthier traffickers, financiers and facilitators with access to foreign currency, transportation, commercial infrastructure and international connections. Let me take a moment, Madam Deputy Speaker, to thank our protective service, the men and the women.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I also take the opportunity to thank our Minister of Homeland Security.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Our Minister of Defence.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The hon. Attorney General and all Ministers of Cabinet of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: So, this Special Operations Bill, 2026 will strengthen the ability of our protective services to enter the areas in which these networks operate, seize their drugs and weapons, arrest their operatives and break their control. At the same time, we are working with local, regional and international law enforcement agencies to pursue those who finance and facilitate the drug running, the human trafficking, and, of course, all the narcotic trafficking.

There will be no two-tiered justice system. Criminals operating from West Moorings, Saint Claire, or Federation Park will be treated in the same manner as those operating from Laventille, operating from Arima or from Siparia or from anywhere else in Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Money must no longer buy immunity. Money must no longer buy immunity.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Status must not prevent investigation. Political connections must not provide protection. My Government plans to dismantle the two-tiered justice system that flourished under the previous PNM regime. We intend to dismantle that two-tiered justice system.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: And therefore, we intend to have firm safeguards for law-abiding citizens to match those strong operational powers. Under the Special Operations Bill, 2026, police officers conducting special operations and defence force members providing military assistance must be trained in human rights, the lawful use of force, engagement with residents and conflict de-escalation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Within closed areas, officers must use body-worn cameras, registered weapons and formally record complaints. Detainees must receive medical care and visitation rights while enhanced powers of search, arrest and detention will remain subject to judicial oversight. I repeat, search, arrest and detention must remain subject to judicial oversight.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: This Special Operations Bill, 2026 will also require joint protocols governing cooperation between the police service and the defence force as well as separate standard operating procedures for each service. Monthly reports must be submitted to the Prime Minister and the Minister responsible for the police service and defence. The Prime Minister must also lay an annual report before Parliament.

This Bill has been revised from the one that was originally debated here and in the other place, and this Bill therefore combines strong operational powers with clear protections for citizens and parliamentary accountability and oversight. These provisions directly address concerns raised about the previous legislation, and now the PNM can no longer hide behind those objections. If they block this Bill again, citizens must ask, whose interest are they protecting?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Having reviewed the previous Bill and in drafting this, I want to give a strong commendation to the AG and his legal team for the drafting work that was done.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: What we have done in this 2026 Bill is about the rights of the people who have borne the burden of violent crime, grieving parents, grieving families terrorized in their homes, businesses facing extortion, young people threatened by gangs, my Government will uphold the Constitution and due process, but we will never apologize for placing law-abiding citizens first. We will never apologize for placing law-abiding citizens first.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: To the criminals, their financiers and facilitators, I issue this warning: The State of Emergency may end, but there will be no sanctuary for you, the criminals of this country.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: We will find you. We will dismantle your networks. We will seize your drugs and your guns and criminal proceeds and bring you before the courts of the land.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: No money, status or political connections will save you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: The full lawful power of the State is coming for you. I repeat, under my UNC Government, the criminals will not prevail. Under my UNC Government, the gangs will not prevail.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Under my UNC Government, law and order will prevail.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

4.15 p.m.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Safety will prevail. The people of Trinidad and Tobago will prevail.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I will do all that I can to make Trinidad and Tobago safe again. Madam Deputy Speaker, I repeat, the Bill has been laid, the Special Operations Bill, 2026 in this House. That Bill will be debated on Friday,

18th September, in this House, and thereafter taken to the Senate. We will leave no stone unturned to go after the criminals, to go after the drug traffickers, to go after the human traffickers. We will leave no stone unturned in the fight against crime. Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank you very much.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you very much, hon. Prime Minister. Supplemental question from Member for Arima.

Ms. Beckles: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Zone of Special Operations Bill will be debated on Friday, as well as the fact that the Bill was laid. Could you indicate to this House when was that Bill laid, and where? Because Friday, of course, does not give us a lot of time to debate, to have sight of the Bill.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Prime Minister.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: I am advised that the Parliament has received the Bill, and they are working on the administrative procedure. So, if not yet on the Paper, it will be done before the sitting ends. Can I also say, you did nothing for 10 years to fight crime, and on every measure, every measure, we bring to fight crime those on the other side have a problem with it. You have to wonder, are they protecting anybody? Are they protecting people? We have to fight crime. We have to fight it. We will do it with or without you. We will do it with or without you.

Ms. Beckles: The Prime Minister has not said when the Bill was laid. You should know when your Bill is laid.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Only one question is allowed for this section.

Hon. K. Persad-Bissessar SC: Madam, the Leader is asking, when was the Bill laid? Can I say, you debated this Bill here for days. You went in the Senate for

four days and you are going to feel you do not have enough time between today and Friday? We have to fight the crime now.

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: The time is now 4.18 p.m. We will now have the tea break and we will return at 5.00 p.m. This House is now suspended.

4.18 p.m.: *Sitting suspended.*

5.00 p.m.: *Sitting resumed.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Hon. Members, I seek the indulgence of the House to revert to two items of business.

PAPER LAID

Gambling (Gaming and Betting) (Remote Gambling) Order, 2026. [*The Minister of Finance and Minister in the Ministry of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development (Hon. Davendranath Tancoo)*]

SPECIAL OPERATIONS BILL, 2026

Bill to provide for the establishment of policing districts, the conduct of special operations to combat criminality in those districts and related matters [*The Attorney General*]; read the first time.

Motion made: That the next stage of the Special Operations Bill, 2026 be taken on Friday, September 18, 2026. [*Sen. The Hon. J. Jeremie SC*]

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker: And just to place on the public record that the Parliament did receive this notice prior to the speaking of the hon. Prime Minister. Thank you.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION (AMDT.) BILL, 2026

Mr. Hans Des Vignes (*Diego Martin West*): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. Today, I rise in representation of the hard-working, resilient people of Carenage to Point Cumana, Westmoorings, Glencoe, Bagatelle, Rich Plain, Covigne Road and all surrounding areas, straight up until Chaguaramas, to contribute to this debate.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Today I rise and I thank the hon. Member from Arima, our Opposition Leader, for the confidence she has placed in all Members on this side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: So, at the outset, let me set the record straight, Madam Deputy Speaker. We on this side, we support the principle of modernizing public administration. It is clear; we support efficiency. We support digital evolution. We support utilizing technology to make government services work and make it accessible for every citizen in Trinidad and Tobago.

Now, before I get deep into my contribution, the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla mentioned a few things. And she mentioned about information published online. The amendments speak to “or”, the newspapers or online. In Trinidad and Tobago, and throughout the world, there is a lack of reliability on online information from non-trusted sources, especially in this day and age of AI and social media. We trust verified news sources and that is why newspapers remain important to Trinidad and Tobago.

When we look at the estates that make up the Government and make up our legislative procedure. It is the Executive branch, the Legislative branch and the Judicial branch. But we understand that the fourth estate, although not listed in the formal way. The fourth estate is the media of Trinidad and Tobago, who answers

and reports to the public, to the people in Trinidad and Tobago, with reference to information. So, to address some of the things the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla said. She said that we sat by and watched the world modernize and did nothing. Nothing can be more false than that, especially when it comes to information and digitization and digital transformation.

Minister Bacchus, the former Minister of Digital Transformation, increased ICT access centres throughout Trinidad and Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: There was the Developers Hub, where developers from Trinidad and Tobago actually developed solutions for Trinidad and Tobago; increasing digital inclusion, increasing digital solutions, won international awards and began the process in terms of electronic identifiers, whereby we had the official digital handshake between EBC and the licensing office of Trinidad and Tobago.

This digital handshake was the first part of the electronic identifiers, which would mean citizens of Trinidad and Tobago no longer have to walk with many IDs to get in contact with government services. All these things happened under our previous Minister of Digital Transformation.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: We speak about access for this information. Over 215 locations nationwide increased access to TTwifi, 23 Wifi locations in high-access areas, 92 additional health centres, 17 primary schools, 48 additional community-based facilities. Drivers licences—

Mr. Hosein: Madam Deputy Speaker, 48(1), what does this have to do with the Bill before us, in terms of just asking for statements to be published on our

website?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member, can you please—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Instead of interrupting me, please let me complete my ruling.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member, can you please tie this into the Bill? Thank you.

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Definitely, Madam Deputy Speaker. The point is, the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla came here and spoke about access and us not doing anything, when access to information online, which is what the amendment is about, has been increased under us.

So, going a little further, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Member for Cumuto/Manzanilla said she is proud to be part of that Government. However, she should not be proud to be part of a government that seeks to erase history. That is the problem.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: The proposals before us amend sections 7, 8, and 9. The Freedom of Information Act allow public authorities the option to publish their annual public statements on an official, publicly-accessible website, rather than relying exclusively on full-page newspaper print runs. And yes, on its face, it is pragmatic. But let us look at the reality. The *Gazette* is actually online. It has been online since 2015, which means, as much as we are coming to debate these amendments, the information is online already.

So, let us go further. In 2026, no one on the side of the House was standing

here and saying that we need to stick with paper-bound bureaucracy. We are not saying that. But Madam Deputy Speaker, there is a vast gulf between supporting a legislative policy in principle and turning a blind eye to the reality of execution under this Government. So, while in essence we support the Bill, we caution this Government on a few things. Modernization must never become a cloak for administrative laziness. Digital transition must not mean digital exclusion. Moving documents from newsprint to website must never be used to dilute the fundamental right of every citizen, and to hold this Government accountable.

The main purpose of the Freedom of Information Act is this; it is to give the public a legal right to access government records and information, making public bodies more transparent and accountable. And yes, I respect the Minister for bringing this Bill to Parliament. He mentioned the origin of the Bill in 1999, and the fact that the Prime Minister supported the Bill in her term. But what he did not mention is, even then, the Bill got bipartisan support. The PNM supported this Bill, and once again we are supporting the Bill because it does well for Trinidad and Tobago.

5.10 p.m.

And yes, I respect the Minister for bringing this Bill to Parliament. He mentioned the origin of the Bill in 1999 and the fact that the Prime Minister supported the Bill in her term. But what he did not mention is even then the Bill got bipartisan support. The PNM supported this Bill, and once again we are supporting the Bill because it does well for Trinidad and Tobago.

Coming from a background in media and broadcasting, I understand the power of communication, but more importantly, as a representative for Diego Martin West, I understand how communication truly flows.

The Minister came to the Parliament and he said, yes, most of Trinidad and Tobago is online—and I agree, most of our citizens are online, but most of our citizens are not going online to find out about Freedom of Information Act. They are going online to watch TikTok videos. They are going online to go on Instagram, Facebook posts. That is what people going online are doing. But people also respect the traditional media. They respect the traditional media and the traditional media entities, who post on these sites and people can trust the information coming from them.

Now, when you shift the legal imperative of section 7 public statements away from daily newspapers and onto the Internet, who are you primarily serving? You are serving the citizen who has all the things in place—the reliable broadband, knows how to use their smart device, is even looking for it and has a high level of digital literacy. One of the main things about this is a publicly accessible website. When we look at it, Facebook is a publicly accessible website. Instagram is a publicly accessible website, and it does not speak to whatever is posted or published being online indefinitely. The Bill does not speak to that.

Therefore, what can happen is what we have seen before, something is posted, it could be deleted and the Government can hide behind this.

Mr. Marcelle: “Dey like to do dat.”

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Again, these are just cautionary warnings for the public and for the Government.

I speak to many senior citizens in my constituency and many of them, they get their information from the newspapers and not online. When you get information from the traditional sources as newspapers, you are not going online and looking for these things. Also, when it comes down to it, someone may be

flipping through the newspapers and see one of the Freedom of Information Act reports and be able to get information that they were not privy to. What you all are suggesting now, with the “or” clause rather than the “and” clause, is someone would actively have to go looking for this information.

Not everyone has the inkling to look for these pieces of information. When we speak about media as well every morning show on radio or television, one of the opening segments of any of these programmes is going through the daily press. That is what they do. They go through the press. And whilst you may say, all right, not everybody is going to buy papers, this is where the root of the information comes from in our society. But again, this Government is so disconnected from all of these things that you all do not know this.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Again, nowhere in the amendments says what is the definition of an official website, public website, publicly accessible? The definitions are not clear. So again, is it that you all are going to set up a new website somewhere? Is it that this is going to be posted on some of the Ministries’ websites? It is unclear, it is vague. When legislation is vague, it leads to all of the wrong things being done. So, when we look at it, right, it is “or” you all are putting forward in this Bill, but there needs to be “and”, and that is why we have submitted that amendment.

We ask the question: Is it that a Minister could do the Facebook post and “call that George”? Is it that we can see what happened to the police service website, where information is published on the police service website and then it disappears two days later. The Homeland Security Minister could come to the Parliament and report one figure. The Prime Minister could say another figure,

and the police service website that was there before had a different figure, but it is now removed. These are the things that we are concerned about as a perspicacious Opposition. We are concerned.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: We look at the individuals that are in front of us. Individuals that run from speaking to the media. Individuals that do not show up to post-Cabinet press conferences.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Individuals that hired their mouthpieces at state media entities. These are the people that are in front of us. So let us look at the Freedom of Information Act just a little bit, just a little bit and the importance of the Freedom of Information Act.

Earlier today, a question was filed on the Sport and Culture Fund, and this is the importance of the Freedom of Information Act and printing it. We, as Members of Parliament, we can come here and we can argue based on the positions that we took and the Freedom of Information Act requests that we posted and sent. We can argue based on that, but what happens when an average citizen does the same? Are you all going to hide behind the cloak of yes it is just online, and people can just pass it by? Let me give you an example for the Sport and Culture Fund. There was a question posted earlier.

Mr. Hosein: Madam Deputy Speaker, what the Member—48(1). What the Member is doing is getting into section 13 of the FOI Act, which this Bill is not amending, this Bill is just amending the publication of the statement.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: Those are matters that the Member can elucidate elsewhere.

Madam Deputy Speaker: If you can immediately tie that back into the clauses being discussed today.

Mr. H. Des Vignes: I can, Madam Deputy Speaker, right. So, Madam Deputy Speaker, the conversation is about this being posted in the newspaper and/or online, right? If this is posted online, someone would not go looking for the information. If it is in the newspaper, they will see it, they can run by happenstance, they can pass over it and they can catch it. And this is if an average person files a Freedom of Information Act request. Now, in our case, yes, we can come to the Parliament and ask. So, for example, and we are also speaking about reliability on the Government and whether or not we can trust some of the things that they are doing, because that is what it comes down to: whether or not we can place reliance on what is being put in front of us?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: When you look at what we filed for, because we are talking about the Freedom of Information Act, we filed for Sport and Culture Fund. Who are the people that got money? What happened? The TTFA, the St. James Police Youth Club, Angelo sailing, Norman's Windball Cricket, and you know who else get money? Stephan Reis Productions got \$100,000 for his 5K.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Hosein: Madam Deputy Speaker, 48(1), what the Member is doing is speaking about a different provision in the Act. Again, this is a very strict provision, which deals with the publication of annual statements. Because we could stand up here and talk about the amount of money that Rhoda Bharath collected under the last administration.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you, Member. So, just for your clarification, section 7(1), sections 8(2), 9(2), 3(1)(b), right? So let us please stick to that, or I will have to ask you to resume your seat.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know, little things get the Member for Barataria/San Juan agitated and antsy.

Hon. Member: [*Laughter*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Today is one of those days he is getting antsy.

Hon. Member: Antsy.

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Yeah. The reason why this is important is because at the root of things, and why the Freedom of Information Act is important and how we translate that information is important. My friend from Claxton Bay mentioned the underpinning, and he went all around the world to search for the underpinning, but the underpinning is right here in Trinidad and Tobago, and it is what Dr. Eric Williams said. He said: Democracy finally rests on a higher power than Parliament.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: It rests on an informed, and cultivated and alert public opinion. Are we aiming to sway the opinions of the public by not keeping them informed? That is the question we are asking.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: So, looking at it, I personally, Madam Deputy Speaker, had the honour of serving with iGovTT, and yes, I do trust the work of the public servants at iGovTT. Hard-working individuals that are committed to their job, and I commend them because again, they maintain robust, secure and accessible

public-facing IT infrastructure. But what the Minister did not do is come to the Parliament and tell us, even with online, how is this going to happen? Where is the information going to be? What assurances do we have in terms of how it will work and how the public will access it? So, a little more specificity in terms of that would help, and that is all we are saying.

Quite often when we are looking at government websites, as mentioned by my colleague from Port of Spain North/St. Anns West, we go to these websites and we see 404 error. The website down. If you cannot maintain a 99 per cent uptime for the website, then, does this really make sense?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Because what are we really talking about? In 2026, make it make sense, we, make it make sense, right?

Madam Deputy Speaker, if a public authority posts its annual statement online, but the site crashes every time traffic spikes, the domain expires, the archive disappears into a digital black hole. Has that public authority truly met its legal obligation?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: This is not transparency by convenience. Again, to the Minister, mandatory uptime requirements, archival integrity, cyber resilience. Up to now, we are not talking about cyber-security. How are we not talking about cyber-security when we have had multiple cyber attacks in this country? Yes, under both administrations, yes, we know. But cyber-security is something we need to talk about if we are speaking about online. But again, we are not getting the depth of information from the Government. You cannot tell the public the

information is on the website when the website itself is not working. Barataria/San Juan, I know you understand about things not working, right?

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: We also talking legal intent versus culture. What is the culture of our people? That is what it goes back to. That is what the point before about the programmes pulling information from the newspapers. That is what the point is about. The point is about that—that our culture is that to pull the information from newspaper. Couva North, Oropouche East, and Caroni Central, all three of them came here with newspapers today—going through the newspapers, flipping, flipping, flipping.

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

Mr. H. Des Vignes: “All three ah dem.”

Mr. Marcelle: *Guardian* too, eh, *Guardian* too.

Mr. H. Des Vignes: “One have *Guardian*, one have *Express* and one wish dey had de *Newsday*.”

Mr. H. Des Vignes: So again, so again, so again—Barataria/San Juan, do not interrupt me, today is not the day.

Mr. Marcelle: Bad behaviour, Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Every day in the local newspapers, let us be honest, we read reports of citizens, community groups, and journalists that submit straightforward FOIA requests. Only to be met with endless administrative extensions, unreasonable legal stalling, blanket exemptions applied without merit, or complete silence until forced into judicial review. Madam Deputy Speaker, digitizing a document does not magically fix a culture of secrecy, and we have seen so much secrecy with this Government in front of us.

Mr. Marcelle: “We just cyah trust dem.”

Mr. H. Des Vignes: We must ensure that this legislation and this change is accompanied by a renewed commitment to responsiveness. Again, we are not hearing responsiveness and intent in terms of this particular legislation. Again, we see the benefit of making this an “and” situation and not an “either/or” situation.

Hon. Member: Tedious repetition.

Mr. H. Des Vignes: I encourage the Government to be transparent in their dealings and publications of these reports. Whereby, if they choose to post a website, let us be assured that it is an official one that remains proactive, active and open. As well as I encourage my media practitioners, as I stand in this Parliament, to also, once activated, regularly check. So again, we can hold this Government to account, and you can do so as our Fourth Estate.

5.25 p.m.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Opposition, we stand on the side of progress. We do. We support this Bill because modernizing how state agencies publish information makes practical and financial sense in 2026. We understand that the Government wants to save money and not pay to print. We understand that. We understand that is a little secret intention inside of there or probably a by-product inside of there. We understand that is a reality. But again, what is the cost of transparency to the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago? Always ask yourself these questions.

We put this Government on fair notice today and we leave them with three clear conditions. Please, again, protect digital equality. Also, with that, I also say, ensure that you stop trying to erase the history of people who put in work before you all were in government. Because you notice, it is a habit, it is a trend. A lot of

things were done to improve access to the digital environment in Trinidad and Tobago. Guarantee infrastructure, reliability, invest in the back-end technology. Let us know about the cybersecurity, the maintenance you all plan to put in place. Ensure the websites are active, secure and archived 24/7. Those are things that we are concerned about, Minister, and uphold the spirit of the Act.

Remember that true transparency is measured by responsiveness and accountability, not by how smoothly you hide behind a digital portal.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. H. Des Vignes: Let us please deliver real structural transparency for the people of Trinidad and Tobago, not just digital spin. Again, once more, I quote the words of our first Prime Minister:

“Democracy, finally, rests on a higher power than”—all of us here in the—
“Parliament. It rests on an informed and cultivated and alert public opinion. The Members of Parliament are only representatives of the citizens.” We—
“...cannot represent apathy and indifference.” We—“...can play the part allotted to...”—us—“...only if...”—we—“...represent intelligence and public spiritness.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, with those words, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Tobago West.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Joel Sampson (*Tobago West*): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am refreshed with humility and honour to represent the people of Tobago West—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson:—and Tobago, by extension, in this august House, and to do so in a political environment that, for once, addresses the country's needs and Tobago's needs side by side.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Therefore, Madam Deputy Speaker, this term's legislative agenda is easily expected to advance the transformation of both islands significantly.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I rise to support the Bill at hand, while insisting that this Government must examine the measure through the lived reality of the people of Tobago. You know, not to stray, I listened to those on the opposite side, and if you are supporting legislation and you come and say, "It is good," support it. Bring meaningful contribution, instead of trying to make bacchanal in the House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: This is not merely a technical amendment to legislation, it is a question of who has access to public information, who is able to hold government accountable, and whether citizens in Tobago can participate meaningfully in decisions that affect their land, economy, communities and future.

Madam Deputy Speaker, modernization is not objectionable in itself. Government must use technology, electronic publication and accessible online platforms, but modernization must not become a convenient excuse to reduce public visibility. For many citizens, particularly older people and persons without reliable Internet access, a newspaper notice may still be one of the most practical ways to learn what a public authority is doing. Therefore, it must guarantee that information is published promptly, prominently, freely, and in a manner accessible to citizens throughout Trinidad and Tobago, including Tobago.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Tobago cannot be treated as an afterthought in the national transparency framework. Public information must be available where people live, not merely where Ministries are headquartered. A Tobago-centred approach to freedom of information requires clear and timely access to information concerning public expenditure and contracts affecting Tobago, infrastructure, roads, water, health, education and transportation, environmental approvals and coastal development, land use and public assets, programmes administered by the Tobago House of Assembly, transfers, allocations, and agreements between the central government and Tobago institutions.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the right to information is especially important for Tobago because self-government and accountability must advance together. Public confidence in stronger Tobago institutions will depend not only on the powers assigned to them, but also on the transparency with which these powers are exercised. Greater responsibility must mean greater disclosure. Tobago deserves the ability to see how decisions are made, how funds are spent, which projects are delayed and who is responsible for delivery. Autonomy cannot mean that citizens are given more government without being given more information.

Madam Deputy Speaker, a request for public information from Tobago should not become a bureaucratic journey through Port of Spain. Public authorities must maintain accessible records and responsive systems in Tobago. The Bill should therefore be implemented with safeguards that ensure requests can be submitted electronically and physically in Tobago; public authorities maintain designated information officers for Tobago-related matters; responses are issued with clear statutory timelines; refusals identify the specific legal basis for

withholding information; citizens have a meaningful avenue of review and appeal; public bodies proactively publish information that citizens routinely request.

Freedom of information laws establish a legal right to know, subject to defined exemptions. Those exemptions must protect legitimate public interests, but they must never become a blanket shield for administrative failure, political embarrassment or poor management. The existing framework recognizes that some institutions and information may be exempt. For example, the Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago is exempt from the application of the Freedom of Information Act under an exemption Order. That reality makes it even more important that exemptions be narrowly interpreted and that the public interest remains central wherever disclosure is legally possible.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Opposition cannot lecture this country about Tobago's rights while asking the people to forget its record. The Constitution (Amdt.) (Tobago Self-Government) Bill, brought by the former PNM administration, failed in December 2024, because they did not secure the special majority required.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Des Vignes: Madam Deputy Speaker, 48(1), what does that Bill have anything to do with this one? Anything.

Mr. J. Sampson: Madam Deputy Speaker, I will tie in everything.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Overruled, Member. Let Tobago West speak, please.

Mr. J. Sampson: Thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Continuous desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I know what is the problem, you know, Tobago finally has a voice in this House.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Because I remember my predecessor said, “Nobody lives here,” but finally, people live there in Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: The PNM now seeks to present itself as the guardian of Tobago’s interests, but Tobago remembers who had the opportunity to act and did not deliver.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Tobago remembers the difference between announcing autonomy and achieving autonomy. Tobago remembers that responsibility without transparency is not empowerment.

Madam Deputy Speaker, this is why the Freedom of Information (Amdt.) Bill matters. A government that asks citizens to trust it must also be prepared to show its work. A government that speaks about Tobago’s development must be prepared to disclose the decisions, contracts, allocations and timelines behind that development.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Madam Deputy Speaker, I support updating the law, but the law should require equivalent or stronger publication through official websites, public notice boards, social media, libraries, community facilities and accessible Tobago-based channels.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the difference between this administration and the former PNM administration is political will.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Political will is not measured by the number of promises made at political meetings, it is measured by whether a government introduces legislation, brings it before Parliament, confronts difficult issues and takes responsibility for improving the country.

Mr. de Nobriga: Madam Deputy Speaker, 55(1)(b), this is about the third person who has now raised this “political will” issue. Can we just move on at this point?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I do not believe it is a “political will” issue there, and now a Member is speaking on behalf of Tobago. So, again, let us let him—

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Okay. This is not a conversation. Member, please continue.

Mr. J. Sampson: Madam Deputy Speaker, I am here to represent the people of Tobago.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Unlike those on the other side who are “bussin mark, I am here to represent Tobago and not buss any mark”. I am speaking facts.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: Madam Deputy Speaker, this administration has demonstrated its willingness to advance legislative changes affecting Tobago.

The Government’s stated legislative agenda described the Tobago House of Assembly (Amdt.) Bill as a move towards greater autonomy within Trinidad and Tobago’s government structure. Madam Deputy Speaker, the recent amendments to the THA Act have also been described as modest in drafting but meaningful in impact, reflecting respect for Tobago’s mandate and leadership. That same determination must guide the implementation of this Freedom of Information Bill.

Transparency must reach every Ministry, every public authority, every island and every citizen. It must apply when the information is politically convenient and when it is politically uncomfortable.

Madam Deputy Speaker, Tobago does not want symbolic recognition. Tobago wants effective representation, transparent administration, timely information and a genuine voice in decisions that shape its future. The people of Tobago have waited long enough for promises to become institutions and for declarations of autonomy to become practical reality. They have seen legislation failure under the PNM, despite years of assurances. They have also seen the consequences when governments do not provide citizens with the information necessary to hold them accountable.

Madam Deputy Speaker, the Freedom of Information (Amdt.) Bill, 2026, must therefore be more than an exercise in legislative housekeeping. It must strengthen the people's rights to know. It must prevent digital modernization from becoming democratic regression. It must protect access for Tobago. It must require public authorities to disclose, explain and account. I support the Bill because Trinidad and Tobago needs a more open government. But I say clearly to the Government, passage is only the beginning. Implementation must be measurable, accessible and fair. And I say to those opposite, the people will remember the difference between those who made promises about Tobago and those who possess the political will to act.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. J. Sampson: This administration will continue to make the necessary changes to the country, strengthen Tobago's democratic institutions and ensure that public power is matched by public accountability.

Madam Deputy Speaker, for this opportunity to present in this honourable House, I thank you.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

5.40 p.m.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member for Port of Spain South.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Keith Scotland SC (*Port of Spain South*): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Madam Deputy Speaker, I heard it said that Tobago never had a voice; they “cyah rewrite all de history”, you know. The strongest voices I have heard in this Parliament, Shamfa Ashaki Cudjoe—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—Ayanna Webster-Roy, they came here week after week—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—and championed Tobago. I do not agree, I do not agree with you, Sir. But we understand the need to rewrite the history. But, Madam Deputy Speaker, there is a great fundamental issue at stake here, you know, these amendments although simple, as they propose to amend clause 2(1)(a) of the Bill which amends section 7 of the Act that outlines the framework regarding publication of information concerning public authorities both in the *Gazette* and daily newspaper and this amendment now which will expand it to a second method of publication allowing information to be published either on a publicly accessible website, or in a daily newspaper circulated in Tobago and the same applies to section 8(2) and the same applies to clause 2(1)(c) and clause 2(2).

Madam Deputy Speaker, at a time when we cannot get answers from this Government, information and freedom of information become even more critical.

One question to the hon. Prime Minister for the day, 13 sent, one approved, it is what it is. So we have to find other methods of getting information from all sources of Government. And we say, Madam Deputy Speaker, that when this Bill is considered, it cannot allow for a position where information is searchable and documents cannot be found. Madam Deputy Speaker, if implemented properly, this amendment will produce some good results.

But when the Bill speaks of “publicly accessible website,” those words matter. What exactly constitutes a publicly accessible website? A publicly accessible website can allow information to be available 24 hours; it can allow persons—

Mr. Lee: Madam Deputy Speaker, 55(1)(b). All evening, we have heard about this publicly—

Hon. Members: He was not here.

Mr. Lee:—you know. It has been discussed over and over, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member, I do not know if you have been keeping up, if you have been aware, but we have heard this many, many times. So if you can move on, I will appreciate it.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: I will move on, Madam Deputy Speaker. The concerns raised here, Madam Deputy Speaker, are that when—it is important for this House to understand that the Freedom of Information Act is not merely just to permit Government to say the information is online. What we must say is, the purpose is to ensure that the citizen can actually find and access the information, be it online or elsewhere. And the Act—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—it already gives that statutory foundation because section 3 of the Act states that:

“The object of the...”—legislation—“...is to extend the right of members of the public to access information in the possession of public authorities.”

Therefore, it expressly contemplates:

“...information about the operations of public authorities”—being made available, together with the general right of access to information in documentary form. Subject, of course, to the exceptions that were stated by speakers that went before, but section 3.2, in the context of this amendment, goes even further. It provides that the:

“...Act...—is to—“...be interpreted so as to further...”—that—
 “...object...and”—the—“...discretion...as far as possible”—to be
 exercised—“so as to facilitate and promote...disclosure”—promptly—
 “...and at the lowest reasonable cost,”

That is the philosophy that Parliament has already placed at the foundation of this legislation. Therefore, if we are going to modernize the means by which the information is published, modernization must be consistent with that underlying principle. The principle of, “promote disclosure promptly and at the lowest possible cost.” So, how do we manage and how do we marry both of them? Madam Deputy Speaker, on this side, we say we must not modernize the medium while leaving the citizen behind. Digital inclusion is a serious issue. We must be careful not to assume or to go on the premise that because a large number of citizens possess smartphones, all citizens have equal access to digital information.

Ms. Benjamin: Madam Deputy Speaker, I have been in this debate. I sat here in this honorable House whole day, and I have to stand on 55(1)(b). I have been here

for the entire afternoon.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Port of Spain South, it really is tedious repetition.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Madam Deputy Speaker, if you say so, I will move on to another point.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Yes, please, move on.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: The issue—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Thank you.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Madam Deputy Speaker, the issue of permanence, as it relates, and this is the keeping of record, but in a permanent manner. Newspaper records, Madam—

Ms. Benjamin: Forgive me, Member. Forgive me, Member. Madam Deputy Speaker, 55(1)(b). I have been in this House from since 1.30 p.m., and that point has been laboured.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Madam Deputy Speaker, I have not developed that point as yet, and not in a way that went before. I am developing the point in a different way, Madam Deputy Speaker, if you will allow me.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Are you finished, Member? Thank you. All of us have been in this House since 1.30 p.m. This is the first time I have seen you in this House. You may not have known about what was said, I do not know, I cannot say for sure. But all of us here can say that this is definitely tedious repetition.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Can you move on to a point that we have not heard before, or maybe we have heard only once? Thank you.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Yes, Madam Deputy Speaker. The point I am making, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that a website does not guarantee permanence, and

therefore there must be some safeguard in place, as opposed to a newspaper, which will have a footprint; it will have a history; it will have a physical record. What is there to ensure—

Mr. Padarath: Madam Deputy Speaker, had the Member been here or paid attention to the debate, the Member for Port of Spain North/St. Ann's East, together with several speakers on that side, traversed this particular issue. It appears the Member has no new issue to add.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Port of Spain South, your own Members have raised this point on many occasions. I ask you once more, please move on.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Madam Deputy Speaker, with the greatest of respect, I am raising this point in a different context. The context of when you compare a newspaper footprint to that of a digital footprint. There are to be, Madam—

Hon. Members: *[Interruption]*

Hon. Member: But he was not here.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Madam Deputy Speaker, there must be greater protection when it relates to digital footprints as opposed to the footprints of a normal newspaper, and that is the point I am making—

Mr. Padarath: Madam Deputy Speaker, I think it is unfair.

Mr. K. Scotland SC:—and that point was not made before.

Mr. Padarath: Madam Deputy Speaker, 55(1)(b). I think it is unfair to Members who could have found themselves here at 1.30 p.m., traverse all of these issues, listen to Members opposite. The Member promised to put his point in a new context, he has failed to do so, Madam Deputy Speaker. I ask that you invoke Standing Order 55(1)(b), please.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Member, for the last time, if you are trying to make a

different point, I would strongly request that you make the point immediately, instead of repeating the same things we have been hearing for a couple hours.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Madam Deputy Speaker, the point, thank you. The point that I am trying to make, and I will continue to make it with a nuance, is that what we wish on this side is the strengthening of transparency via these amendments that have been proposed, and if that is to be done, Madam Deputy Speaker, there must be safeguards because those safeguards will make it essential for accountability. It will make it essential for journalists. Madam Deputy Speaker, it is essential for researchers, it is essential for people who would seek the information in the future, and that is why I am making that point in this context. In fact—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. K. Scotland SC: —I dare say, I dare say, it is essential for civil society, and most importantly, it is essential for this Parliament itself that we have integrity in the maintenance of those records.

The last point I wish to make on this is the issue of transparency and trust. I want to make a reference, Madam Deputy Speaker, between transparency and trust together, and there is a temptation in public life to believe that citizens may become frustrated because they do not understand the Government. I would suggest that the citizens become frustrated because the Government does not tell them enough, and we would want to see this legislation, this amendment, improve itself that will enable the Government to tell the agencies, whoever does their reporting, to tell the people enough. When information is delayed, people become suspicious. When records are inaccessible—

Mr. Padarath: Madam Deputy Speaker, 55(1)(b).

Mr. K. Scotland SC: “Yuh heard that?” Seriously?

Mr. Padarath: We are still hearing the same rhetoric and no new point. Accountability, Madam Deputy Speaker, has been traversed on this issue. Madam Speaker, please, I am asking you to implore the Member to move on to a completely different point, we have been here for several hours.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will allow you to continue on relevance, Member.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: However, Member, this is your last warning to continue on relevance before I ask you to resume your seat.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. Therefore, on this side, we say that transparency will strengthen and not weaken the Government. And done properly, transparency will strengthen the public confidence. However, Madam Deputy Speaker, there are some principles that we have looked at on this side that would guide the implementation of this Bill. And, Madam Deputy Speaker, the first one we want to say is that digital publication, it must be genuinely free, and it must pin itself to the original concept of the Bill, which is—and at the lowest possible cost. Secondly, Madam Deputy Speaker, there should be consistent standard across the public authority. Thirdly,—

Mr. Padarath: Madam Deputy Speaker, 55(1)(b).

Mr. Birchwood: 53(1)(b). 53(1)(b).

Mr. Padarath: Cannot be that we have been here since 1.30 p.m., traversing all of these issues and we—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Okay, Members.

Mr. Padarath:—have to stand and listen to another speaker on that side.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Yes, I understand your point, Member. You have just

made this exact point.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: I will move on, Madam Deputy Speaker. The fourth point I wish to make, Madam Deputy Speaker, is that there should be a clear responsibility within each public authority for ensuring that their publication obligations are met.

Finally, Parliament should receive regular information and data on compliance with these regulations. Madam Deputy Speaker, what happened, you are not jumping up. Therefore, Madam Deputy Speaker, I call on the Government to take these concerns that we have on this side seriously, as we embrace technology, without abandoning accessibility. We would want this legislation, which we support, which we support, to reduce the unnecessary administrative burdens without sacrificing transparency. Madam Deputy Speaker, we have submitted for the consideration of the House some amendments.

Hon. Members: One. One. One.

Mr. K. Scotland SC: Madam Deputy Speaker, we would want to modernize the laws without weakening the public record. And above all, information held by the State is ultimately connected to the people who we serve on this side, and if that information is withheld, we will use whatever mechanisms are there for us, including this Bill, including the amendment, which we say is good, but there is room for improvement. And if this amendment is implemented with the right safeguards, the right standards, and the right commitment to accessibility, it could only help to make Trinidad and Tobago stronger. And we on this side support legislation that makes Trinidad and Tobago stronger. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Deputy Speaker: Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and

Development.

5.55 p.m.

The Minister of Planning, Economic Affairs and Development and Minister in the Ministry of Finance (Sen. The Hon. Dr. Kennedy Swaratsingh): Madam Deputy Speaker, thank you very much. I am a stranger to this place. I am generally disposed to be without rancour or fiery debate in whatever my contributions are, but, having sat here for this afternoon and listened to a depleted Bench opposite, and the last speaker, let me start where he ended. He advocated that when they as a party were in government, they themselves were the epitome of transparency and trust, that they exercised the Freedom of Information Act in ways in which they are accusing us. but sometimes pot must not call kettle black.

I know my colleague, the Member of Parliament for Claxton Bay, would have talked about the number of times they were derelict in following this legislation. But Madam Deputy Speaker, when it is that persons opposite could cast aspersions about what we may or may not do, they must recognize that sometimes old people say, “The higher monkey climb is de more he bamcee exposed.”

Hon. Members: [*Laughter*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: In December 2025, in a case by *Hershael Ramesar vs Children’s Life Fund Authority*, my colleague, my learned researcher this afternoon, Member of Parliament for Barataria/San Juan, would have shared with me—

Hon. Member: [*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: No, no, no, I have to give him credit, because I asked him to research any instance where you opposite were derelict in the ways in which you want to accuse us of.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: And in that case, the CEO for the Children's Life Fund Authority would have stated, in the case, the claimant claims:

“It is the...case that while the Defendant has tried to comply with their breached statutory duties for the year or period ending 2022, it does not meet the mandatory statutory requirement imposed by FOIA which requires the Defendant to publish its requisite public statements...”

This is in 2025, eh. This is from 2022.

“Accordingly, each year, the Defendant failed to publish its public statements within the prescribed time for each year, it was in breach of the position of the FOIA. It has also failed to remedy the continuous breaches for failures and/or neglect and/or refusal to adhere to the aforesaid statutory obligations of the FOIA for the years 2016-2021.

The Defendant does not dispute that the Defendant failed to publish the statements required by sections 7, 8...9 of the FOIA Act for a number of years prior to 2022. Rather, it contends that publication of the statements requires the approval of the Minister, and that such approval was not forthcoming.”

Hon. Members: Wow!

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: That is the Minister of Health. I am ashamed to say, I am ashamed to say, my successor in St. Joseph.

Hon. Member: But Devesh—[*Inaudible*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh (cont'd)

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Yes, but we put that right.

Dr. Moonilal: We fixed that.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But Madam Deputy Speaker, if that was all, we bad enough, but it gets worse.

“It asserted that a lack of publication was due to circumstances beyond its remit...”

This is the CEO saying he could not comply with the Freedom of Information Act because of his line Minister.

The “...line Minister had not and was not minded to grant the requisite approval to publish the statements in question...”

Transparency and trust. “You cyah trust the Government.” It is because you are acting, because that has become your DNA. “People cyah trust you.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Madam Deputy Speaker—

“The Defendant therefore argues that its ‘hands were tied’ and that it was unable to comply with the Act.”

But Madam Deputy Speaker, the judgment went on:

“The Defendant contends that the Minister’s refusal to approve publication of the prior statements was guided by an overarching policy emanating from the Office of the Prime Minister...”

Hon. Members: Oooohhh!

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Madam Deputy Speaker—

“...and that this policy direction provides reasonable justification for the Defendant’s non-compliance.”

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh (cont'd)

I want the Member of Parliament for Diego Martin West, the successor of that former, former Prime Minister, to understand all the things he talks about and know where he gets it from. It happens when you sit in that seat.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: When you sit in that seat—but Madam Deputy Speaker, I am not prone, this is not my normal disposition, but I cannot help it today. On the initial contribution of the Member of Parliament for Port Spain North/St. Ann's West, I was really taken aback by the audacity. He said that this administration has perpetrated an assault on democracy. The only assault I could remember is when the former, former Prime Minister tried to foist him onto the PNM and onto the country—

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh:—without being elected the political leader. And that assault was repudiated by the population on April 28th.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But of course, Madam Deputy Speaker, they would talk and then, as is their due, run from the Parliament. But Madam Deputy Speaker, if that was it, it would have been bad enough. But Madam Deputy Speaker, it has more. It seems as if, and I want to offer some free advice to the Chief Whip—

Dr. Moonilal: Acting.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Acting Chief Whip. “Caucus please before allyuh come to the Parliament.” Somehow it has in the Benches opposite and those in the other place about four SCs, and like none of them can agree with each other. Because I sat in the other place and I want to read what a former Attorney General

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh (cont'd)

in the other place, his contribution. And if they read it, we would not have been here all evening. But let me just read part of what the former Attorney General. And sometimes, you know, I have to blame the hon. Attorney General because he taught some of them.

Hon. Members: “Oh waw!”

Hon. Member: That is a real low blow.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So, today he sat quietly. Because somehow, even though his teaching skills were good, stick break in their ears. So, the former Attorney General and I quote his contribution:

“After all, before my tenure as Attorney General, there were no electronic filings. There was no Companies Registry online. There were no reports in Trinidad and Tobago online. There were no virtual courts. The entire land registry lay in paper. So, we are accustomed to doing hard work for the benefit, and one must have the courage to say to others who are doing the right progress and trajectory, congratulations. So, congratulations, hon. Minister...Mr. President, I do not agree with the proposed amendment from Sen. Wesley Gibbings. First of all, I agree with Sen. Allahar that the World Wide Web...”

World Wide Web—all the thing about “how yuh define ah website and what it is.” He agrees.

“I definitely agree with that. There is a rule of statutory interpretation where you use the ordinary meaning, the plain and ordinary meaning. The reason for the word ‘publicly’ is that so it would not be a private network. The reason for ‘accessible’ is, again, to embellish that access point, and ‘website’ means website. So, I wholeheartedly agree with that point. The fact that we

are proposing that publication must be married with the *Gazette* is the salvation itself.”

Hon. Members: Oooh!

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Former Attorney General, Senior Counsel in the other place.

Mr. Marcelle: Who? Say it.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: The hon. Sen. Faris Al-Rawi.

Hon. Members: Oooh!

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: But Madam Deputy Speaker, Madam Deputy Speaker—you know, and I want to place his other part, which is important as well on record in this House.

“I, like Sen. Allahar, do read the *Gazette* on a continuous basis. It is certainly something that perhaps is at the time for improvement, but there are...improvements going on, but the *Gazette* is the degree of the immutable. It cannot change. A website can be refashioned. It can be hacked. It can be changed. But the *Gazette* is done both in hard-copy publication and...electronic publication, and therefore, there is...adequate safeguard built into...law that requires that.”

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: Madam Deputy Speaker—

“The fact is that we do need to conserve...”

And listen to this—

“...we do need to conserve government expenditure.”

Hon. Member: Diego Martin West you could have talked to Faris.

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: “I shoulda ask him tuh come and move de Bill here.” And he went on to say, Madam Deputy Speaker:

“And therefore, the move to bringing this on to an online publication for public bodies—and if you look to the definition section of the FOI Act, you will see the FOI Act, you will see that a public body is defined, it includes everything, including corporate bodies which have government control. So, this is...the very least a \$24 to \$25 million savings per year, and it is definitely something worth pursuing. And I think that the time is right for that.”

Madam Deputy Speaker, I could not say it better myself.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Sen. The Hon. Dr. K. Swaratsingh: So, Madam Deputy Speaker, with the words of the hon. Sen. Faris Al-Rawi, I beg to move.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a second time.

Bill committed to a committee of the whole House.

House in committee.

6.10p.m.

Clause 1 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2.

Question proposed: That clause 2 stand part of the Bill.

Madam Chairman: Member for Diego Martin Central.

Mr. de Nobriga: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. We have submitted an amendment to clause 2:

“Delete the words ‘either in a daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and

Tobago or on a publicly accessible website’ wherever they occur and substitute the words ‘in a daily newspaper circulating in Trinidad and Tobago and on a publicly accessible website’.

Madam Chairman, we have made the point throughout the debate. I think the phrasing as it exists in the Bill right now allows for a decision to be made either between the *Gazette* or on the website.

What we are saying, as has been stated previously and is reflected in the amendment, is that, for as wide a dissemination as possible, that this clause allows for that. We hope that the Government will take it under consideration.

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

Sen. Dr. Swaratsingh: Madam Chairman, yes, this is inconsistent with the Government’s position as has been argued in the debate, so we will not be accepting this amendment.

Hon. Members: [*Desk thumping*]

Question on amendment, put and negatived.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

New clause 3.

New clause 3 read the first time.

Madam Chairman: Port of Spain South.

[*Clerk confers with Chairman*]

Mr. Scotland SC: Madam Chairman, in—

Madam Chairman: One second, Member.

Mr. Scotland SC: Yes.

Question proposed: That new clause 3 be read a second time.

Question put and negatived.

Mr. Scotland SC: Madam Chairman—

Hon. Member: “Allyuh didn’t vote for de other side.”

Hon. Members: [*Crosstalk*]

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

House resumed.

Bill reported, without amendment, read the third time and passed

ADJOURNMENT

Madam Deputy Speaker: Leader of the House.

The Minister of Public Utilities and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Barry Padarath): Thank you most kindly, Madam Deputy Speaker. I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday, 18 September at 10.30 a.m. As the hon. Prime Minister indicated, Madam Deputy Speaker, the Government will be pursuing the Special Operations Bill—SOB—2026.

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 6.18p.m.