

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES*Monday, November 09, 2020*

The House met at 1.30 p.m.

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

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, I have received communication from the following Members requesting leave of absence from today's sitting: Ms. Khadijah Ameen, MP, Member of Parliament for St. Augustine and Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP, Member of Parliament for Couva South. The leave which the hon. Members seek is hereby granted.

SESSIONAL SELECT COMMITTEES**(APPOINTMENT OF)**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, pursuant to Standing Order 89(2), I have appointed the following Members to serve on the Sessional Select Committees of the House of Representatives for the First Session Twelfth Parliament.

Standing Orders Committee

Mrs. Bridgid Annisette-George	Chairman
Mr. Dinesh Rambally	Member
Dr. Rishad Seecharan	Member
Mr. Faris Al-Rawi	Member
Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly	Member
Mr. Keith Scotland	Member

House Committee

Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis	Chairman
Mr. Barry Padarath	Member

UNREVISED

Mr. David Lee	Member
Mr. Colm Imbert	Member
Mr. Brian Manning	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy	Member

Committee of Privileges

Mrs. Bridgid Annisette-George	Chairman
Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis	Member
Mr. Fitzgerald Hinds	Member
Mr. Stuart Young	Member
Dr. Roodal Moonilal	Member
Mr. Saddam Hosein	Member

Statutory Instruments Committee

Mrs. Bridgid Annisette-George	Chairman
Mr. Keith Scotland	Member
Mr. Stuart Young	Member
Mr. Kennedy Richards	Member
Mr. Dinesh Rambally	Member
Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh	Member

Business Committee

Mrs. Bridgid Annisette-George	Chairman
Mr. Colm Imbert	Member
Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis	Member
Mr. Stephen Mc Clashie	Member
Dr. Rai Ragbir	Member
Mr. Ravi Ratiram	Member

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEES

(ESTABLISHMENT OF)

Madam Speaker: Correspondence from the President of the Senate. Hon. Members, correspondence has been received from the President of the Senate dated November 05, 2020, which states as follows:

“Dear Speaker,

Establishment of Joint Select Committees

I wish to advise that at a sitting held on Monday October 26, 2020, the Senate agreed on the following resolutions:

- (i) ‘Be it resolved that in accordance with Standing Order 62(1)(c) ‘The Fisheries Management (No. 2) Bill, 2020’, be referred to the Joint Select Committee hereby established for its consideration and report by December 31, 2020; and
- (ii) Be it resolved that in accordance with Standing Order 62(1)(c) ‘The Shipping Bill, 2020’, be referred to the Joint Select Committee hereby established for its consideration and report by December 31, 2020.’

Accordingly, I respectfully request that the House of Representatives be informed of this decision at the earliest convenience please.

Thank you.

Respectfully,

/s/ Senator the Hon. Christine Kangaloo

President of the Senate”

PAPERS LAID

1. Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2020. [*The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert)*]

2. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Statement of the Recovery of Expenses of the Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries for the year ended December 31, 2019. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
3. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2016. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]
4. Report of the Auditor General of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago on the Financial Statements of the San Juan/Laventille Regional Corporation for the year ended September 30, 2017. [*Hon. C. Imbert*]

Papers 2 to 4 to be referred to the Public Accounts Committee.

5. Administrative Report of the Water and Sewerage Authority for the fiscal year 2015/2016. [*The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales)*]
6. Administrative Report of the Water and Sewerage Authority for the fiscal year 2016/2017. [*Hon. M. Gonzales*]
7. Civil Aviation [(No. 9) Approved Training Organisation] (Amendment) Regulations, 2020. [*The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis)*]
8. Civil Aviation [(No. 12) Aerodrome Licensing] (Amendment) Regulations, 2020. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
9. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Finance to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of Caricom. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
10. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Foreign and Caricom Affairs to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on

- an Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of Caricom. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
11. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Labour and Small Enterprise Development to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of Caricom. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
 12. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Ninth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Trinidad and Tobago's performance in negotiating/creating opportunities for trade outside of Caricom. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
 13. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Trade and Industry to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Consumer Awareness, Empowerment and Protection Systems. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
 14. Ministerial Response of Ministry of Health to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs on an Inquiry into Consumer Awareness, Empowerment and Protection Systems. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
 15. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Planning and Development to the Tenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure on an Inquiry into Flood Alleviation and Control Measures for Major River Basins and Drainage Catchments in Trinidad and Tobago subjected to major flooding over the past years. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]
 16. Ministerial Response of the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to the Seventeenth Report of the Joint Select Committee on Human

Rights, Equality and Diversity on the Inquiry into Persons living in Poverty and Extreme Poverty in Trinidad and Tobago with specific focus on vulnerable groups. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

17. Annual Report of the Teaching Service Commission for the years 2018 to 2019. [*Hon. C. Robinson-Regis*]

URGENT QUESTION

Diver Reinaldo Novoa

(Rescue Operations by the Coast Guard)

Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Question No. 1 to the Minister of National Security. In light of the missing diver, Mr. Reinaldo Novoa, who disappeared on the Mayaro coast last evening, could the Minister state what urgent measures have been taken by the coast guard to aid in the search and rescue operations of this missing diver?

The Minister of National Security and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (**Hon. Stuart Young**): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this incident occurred yesterday in an area approximately 18 nautical miles offshore east of Nariva. Upon receipt of the information, a coast guard patrol vessel from the south coast was redirected to the east coast where it conducted searches until nightfall, unfortunately, with negative results.

The Trinidad and Tobago Air Guard conducted a flight on the morning of the 9th of November but did not see anything. The coast guard continues to maintain contact with the family and other search parties. Based on the drift and past cases, landfall is generally expected to be made close to Balandra. Thus far, friends and family members are canvassing the Balandra area.

The air guard continues to assist and will do more flights, and the coast guard is sending another vessel to the east coast to search from Toco heading to the

south-east. And this morning as well, Madam Speaker, in following up on this, there was information that we will also conduct searches using the air guard and whatever other coast guard vessels that are necessary from Tobago, come down to Trinidad, if the body or the person is not found.

ORAL ANSWER TO QUESTION

Water Shortages in Barataria/San Juan

1. **Mr. Saddam Hosein** (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of Public Utilities:

A. Could the Minister provide the reasons for water shortages in the constituency of Barataria/San Juan?

B. Could the Minister state the immediate steps taken to ensure a constant supply of water to constituents of Barataria/San Juan?

The Minister of Public Utilities (Hon. Marvin Gonzales): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the supply of pipe borne water to certain parts of the constituency of San Juan/Barataria was reduced because of a defective valve on WASA's Caroni transmission trunk main at Black River which is located on the Maritime roundabout area. Madam Speaker, the situation has since been rectified and a regular supply of water has been restored to the affected residents.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Barataria/San Juan. Leader of the House.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Thank you very kindly, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, there are 26 Oral Questions on notice, we will be answering all of them. There are five Questions for Written Answers, we will be answering questions 16, 30 and 47 and we are asking for a two-week deferral for questions 4 and 43. Thank you.

WRITTEN ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS**Pandemic Food Support Programme****(Details of Constituency Distributions)**

- 16. Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services:

With regard to the Food Support Programme during this pandemic, could the Minister provide the following update: (a) the total number of Temporary Food Support Cards distributed to each constituency as at September 01, 2020; and

- (b) the total number of hampers distributed to each constituency as at September 01, 2020?

COVID-19 Grant Applications, Food Support Cards and Hampers**(Mayaro Constituency)**

- 30. Mr. Rushton Paray** (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services:

Could the Minister provide:

- (a) a summary report on the total number of COVID-19 grant applications received and approved from applicants residing in the constituency of Mayaro;
- (b) the total number of food support cards and food hampers distributed in the constituency of Mayaro?

NEDCO's Entrepreneurial Relief Grant Programme**(Details of Grants)**

- 47. Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

With regard to the National Entrepreneurship Development Company Limited's (NEDCO's) Entrepreneurial Relief Grant Programme for micro

and small enterprises, which reportedly began disbursements on August 05, 2020, could the Minister provide:

- (a) the total number of grants issued as at September 21, 2020;
- (b) the total monetary value of the grants issued as at September 21, 2020;
- (c) the total number of individuals or small and micro enterprises that applied for these grants as at September 21, 2020; and
- (d) the list of all grants recipients and the corresponding individual monetary value of each grant as at September 21, 2020?

Vide end of sitting for written answers.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

Food Cards Distributed in Constituencies

(Details of)

- 2. Mr. Saddam Hosein** (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services:

Could the Minister state:

- (a) the total number of food cards distributed between July 01, 2020 and August 09, 2020 in each of the constituencies of Barataria/San Juan, St. Joseph, Tunapuna, San Fernando West, Moruga/Tableland, Chaguanas East, Toco/Sangre Grande and Tobago East; and
- (b) the value of the food cards distributed in part (a)?

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

Thank you, Madam Speaker. On behalf of the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, during the pandemic period which commenced in April 2020, a total of 3,997 food cards were distributed by the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services to Members of Parliament for the constituencies of

Barataria/San Juan, St. Joseph, Tunapuna, San Fernando West, Moruga/Tableland, Chaguanas East, Toco/Sangre Grande and Tobago East. These were to households that received meals from the School Feeding Programme, but who were not beneficiaries of food support. The total does not include additional supermarket gift cards which were distributed as part of the market box initiative.

A breakdown of the number of food cards distributed to the above cohort together with the monetary values for the aforementioned constituencies is as follows: Barataria/San Juan, 497 cards, the expenditure was \$760,410; St. Joseph, 500 cards, the expenditure was \$765,000; Tunapuna, 500 cards, the expenditure was \$765,000; San Fernando West, 500 cards, expenditure \$765,000; Moruga/Tableland, 500, the expenditure was \$765,000; Chaguanas East, 500 cards and the expenditure was \$765,000; Toco/Sangre Grande, 500 cards with expenditure of \$765,000; Tobago East, 500 cards and the expenditure was \$765,000. The total value of food cards distributed to the 3,997 households that received meals from the School Feeding Programme, but who were not beneficiaries of food support is in the sum of \$6,115,410. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Can the Minister indicate whether or not the recipients of these food cards are still receiving support under the cards that were issued for the pandemic period?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: No, they are not, Madam Speaker.

Mr. Hosein: So, is the Minister confirming that the 3,997 cards currently are not active and those persons are no longer on the Food Support Programme?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, the cards were for a three-month period, so the cards are not supposed to be active.

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town, supplemental.

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, to the hon. Minister. Minister, in light of the answer that you have provided, can you indicate to us whether Government has taken a decision with respect to the children who are on the School Feeding Programme, whether their families will continue to benefit from this food card assistance programme or whether or not a decision has been taken to continue with the School Feeding Programme as we proceed into the next few months?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: The Government found that the market box initiative worked very well and, as a consequence of that, that is the initiative that we will be continuing with so that the children will receive food support.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Princes Town.

Mr. Padarath: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Hon. Minister, I took the answer you have just provided—the information you have just provided us with. Can you indicate whether or not all students who are on the School Feeding Programme, their families will benefit from these and what will be the distribution process and the duration of this?

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, the Member seems to be pre-empting a question that is already on the Order Paper for answer and we will give the answer when we get to that question.

Number of Housing Units Distributed

(Details of)

3. Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*) asked the hon. Minister of Housing and Urban Development:

Could the Minister state:

- (a) the number of Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation units distributed and/or allocated for distribution for the period January to August 2020; and
- (b) the areas that the housing units were distributed and/or allocated for distribution in part (a) and the number of units per area?

The Minister of Housing and Urban Development (Hon. Penelope Beckles):

Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in response to question (a) which is the number of Trinidad and Tobago Housing Development Corporation units distributed and/or allocated for the period January to August 2020, it is 1,510 units over the period January to August 2020.

And in relation to the second, (b), the areas that the housing units were distributed and/or allocated, and the number of unit per area for the period January to August 2020: Almond Court, 1; Bon Air, Bacaday Road, 2; Bon Air North, 7; Bon Air South, 5; Boys Lane, 7; Buen Intento, 12; Carina Gardens, 8; Carlsen Field, 75; Chaconia Crescent, 2; Cumana/Toco, 1; Bamboo Creek Villas, Cunupia, 13; Cypress Hills, San Fernando, 32; Debe, 1; Eden Gardens, 18; Edinburgh 6—Edinburgh South, sorry, 6; another Edinburgh South, 20; Exchange, 3; Fairfield 2; Fidelis Heights, 3; Glenroy, 1; Gomez Trace, 3; Greenvale, 4; Harmony Hall, Marabella, 101; Hubertstown, Point Fortin, 8; Gentian Gardens, 3; Lake View, Point Fortin, 54; Lion's Gate, 1; Malabar, 3; Malabar, Elma Reyes Street, 7; Malabar, Heron Court, 60, Malabar, Holly Betaudier, 12; Malabar, Nepuyo Court, 8; Mora Heights, 1; Mahogany Courts, 136; Pioneer Crescent, 10; Oasis Greens, 283, Olera Heights, 2; Oropune, 3; Pierre Road, La Brea, 4; Pleasantville, 20; Real Spring Park, Valsayn, 199; Retrench, 2; Riverside East, Corinth, 4; Riverside North, Corinth Hills, 15; Riverside South, Corinth, 93; Trestrail, 231; Vieux Fort, 6 and that is the total of 1,506.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Barataria/San Juan.

Mr. Hosein: Thank you very much. Through you, Madam Speaker, of all the units that have been distributed in the various areas that you have outlined to the House, can you tell us—I do not know if you will have the information now—how many outstanding units are there still to be distributed in these existing developments?

Hon. P. Beckles: I cannot answer that at this time, but you can submit it and I will respond.

**Naparima Mayaro/Cunapo Southern Main Roads
(Plans to Repair/Rebuild)**

17. Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Could the Minister state:

- (a) the plans, if any, to provide a comprehensive repair/rebuild of the Naparima Mayaro Road from Tableland to Mayaro; and
- (b) the plans, if any, to provide a comprehensive repair/rebuild of the Cunapo Southern Main Road from Rio Claro to Biche?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, in addition to routine in-house patching, the drainage works, the Highways Division has undertaken a systematic programme of contracted work annually since 2019 to address the conditions of Naparima Mayaro Road. In this context, slope stabilization work was completed in 2019 at the 27.4 kilometre mark of this road and rehabilitation of the Tableland to Rio Claro section of the Naparima Mayaro Road is proposed to start in the first half of calendar 2021.

Sectional road rehabilitation work is expected to start in the first half of calendar 2021 between 8 kilometre and the 22 kilometre mark at the Cunapo

Southern Road. Thank you.

Guayaguayare Bay Coastal Remedial Work

(Approval of)

18. Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Could the Minister state whether the planned coastal remedial work for the Guayaguayare Bay received Cabinet approval and if yes, the expected commencement date of these works?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, Cabinet has approved new coastal protection and remedial work at the Guayaguayare Bay area and funding has been allocated for the required construction work. The Ministry expects to begin the tender process for these projects by the end of 2020, and barring unforeseen circumstances, new coastal protection work in the Guayaguayare area is programmed to commence in the first half of 2021. Thank you.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Mayaro.

Mr. Paray: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, any conversation in terms of the transfer or the relocation of residents who live in the vicinity of the areas that are slipping and, perhaps, the opportunity for a new housing development that they can be moved to while works happen along this area?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, those arrangements and agreements do not fall within the Ministry of Works and Transport, and I guess the Member can raise that with the relevant Ministers who deal with relocations and housing. Thank you.

Bridge and Landslip Repairs

(Mayaro Constituency)

19. Mr. Rushton Paray (*Mayaro*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Could the Minister provide the list of bridge and landslip repairs scheduled to be executed in the constituency of Mayaro in fiscal 2021?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you again, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the following bridges and landslip projects are scheduled for implementation in the Mayaro constituency in fiscal 2021 under the BLT Programme. Two bridges via the BLT, Bridge Reconstruction Programme, page 3, is as follows: B1/11, Mayaro/Guayaguayare Road, Mayaro; B1/40 Cunapo Southern Road, Mayaro.

For landslips via the BLT, Landslip Repair Programme Phase II A is as follows: L19 Tabaquite Road, Rio Claro, 46.125 to 46.175 kilometres; L20 Naparima Mayaro Road; LP 810; L21 Cunapo Southern Main Road, 29.9 to 30 kilometres and L22, Cunapo Southern Main Road, 24.7 to 24.72 kilometres Mayaro. I thank you.

Donation of Laptops

(Measures to deal with Shortfall)

32. Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

Having regard to the Government's request to the private sector for the donation of laptops for students, could the Minister indicate what measures have been put in place to acquire laptops for students should private sector donations fall short of the number required?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Ministry of Education has allocated the sum of \$50 million in the 2021 budget, which will allow the purchase of 20,000 laptop computers with rubber bumpers and reinforced ports, especially designed for use

by secondary school students. A means test will be applied to determine eligibility for the allocation of these devices.

With respect to tablets which are used primarily by the primary school students, the Ministry of Education has so far received pledges for donations of over 20,000 devices, mainly tablets, which are given directly to schools upon receipt. We wish to thank the private sector at this time who has given so generously, and all indications are that they will continue to assist the Ministry and the children of this country with the donation of devices, mainly tablets, for use by students who are in need of them. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Tabaquite. [*Desk thumping*]

Ms. Haynes: Thank you Minister, for your answer. Based on your answer, is there a list of the schools? Is there an order that the schools are going in? You said the devices are being given from the donors directly to the schools. Is there a rollout programme for which schools get devices at which time?

Hon. Dr. N. Gadsby-Dolly: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The list of schools are available on the Ministry's website and that is where the donors are directed, and they would make their decision to which schools they would like to give. So that is how it is being managed.

Ms. Haynes: Thank you.

Homework Centres/Learning Spaces

(Establishment of)

33. Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*) asked the hon. Minister of Education:

Could the Minister indicate whether any consideration has been given to the establishment of homework centres or learning spaces for students in rural areas who may not have access to Internet and/or electricity?

The Minister of Education (Hon. Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly): Thank you, Madam

Speaker. Homework centres are operated by non-governmental organizations with partial funding from the Ministry of Education, and these operate in schools or community facilities between the hours of 3.00 p.m. and 6.00 p.m., Monday to Friday during the school term. The centres are non-fee paying and target students who have difficulty in remaining at home to complete their studies or who lack the resources to complete their homework and keep up with class work.

As of March 2020, there were eight homework centres mostly in urban areas. However, the centres have been closed since March 2020 when all schools and educational institutions were closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Preliminary discussions have taken place with stakeholders with respect to the establishment of homework centres in rural areas, and the Ministry of Education will examine the feasibility of same. However, these discussions will have to take place in the context of safety for our children.

2.00 p.m.

School Nutrition Programme

(Food Cards Issued to Parents)

34. Ms. Anita Haynes (*Tabaquite*) asked the hon. Minister of Social Development and Family Services:

Given the extension of the COVID-19 restrictions, could the Minister indicate whether food cards issued to the parents with children in the School Nutrition Programme will be topped-up and if so, what will be the value?

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

Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Social Development and Family Services, traditional food cards do not necessarily stimulate local food production but may instead facilitate the importation of food, and thus increase the food import bill. Accordingly, consistent with our policy to boost agriculture with

schools being closed, the Government has decided to distribute market boxes at this time with fresh locally grown produce to the parents or guardians of the 79,000 children registered with the School Feeding Programme. This measure is expected to cost approximately \$20 million in the first instance.

Garth Road, Williamsville

(Comprehensive Geological Assessment of)

37. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of Works and Transport:

Could the Minister state whether a comprehensive geological assessment of the Garth Road in Williamsville is being undertaken to ensure that any roadworks done do not deteriorate within months of its completion?

The Minister of Works and Transport (Sen. The Hon. Rohan Sinanan): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, no geographical assessment of Garth Road is being undertaken at this time. Garth Road is one of the many roads in the country that has evolved over time from a bridle track to road without any proper structural foundation. This road was constructed along the ridge of the rolling hill with highly expansive clay soil, profiles typical of this area. Common defects associated with this terrain and soil types are landslips and depressions.

As a result, every year the Ministry carries out maintenance work which involves filling depressions and stabilizing the slopes to keep the road passable. The Ministry is in the process of setting up a programme for the conduct of a comprehensive geotechnical investigation of such roads as I have described, inclusive of Garth Road, and using the data a suitable design will be done for each road. I thank you.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Thank you. Minister, could you give us an indication of when these

geological studies will commence, given the fact that you are aware of the situation?

Sen. The Hon. R. Sinanan: Madam Speaker, the Ministry is in the process of setting up the programme so I cannot give you an exact day when it will start, but the process has started to set up the programme. Thank you.

Caribbean Public Health Agency

(Lower Testing Rates for T&T)

39. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Could the Minister provide the reasons why Trinidad and Tobago's Caribbean Public Health Agency testing rates were comparatively lower per capita (in comparison to other Caricom countries) prior to the general election on August 10, 2020?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, this question is based on a false premise as prior to the August 10, 2020 general election, the Caribbean Public Health Agency was only one of four laboratories approved for COVID-19 testing in Trinidad and Tobago. The other three approved laboratories include: one, the UWI virology lab at Eric Williams Medical Sciences Complex that started services on May 01, 2020, with a daily capacity of 200 tests; the laboratory at the Tobago Regional Health Authority that commenced services on June 27, 2020, before, again, the general election, with a daily capacity of 50; and, thirdly, the laboratory at the North-Central Regional Health Authority that commenced services on August 7th, again before the election, with a daily capacity of 200. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Could the Minister therefore explain why, according to international

statistics from Johns Hopkins University, TT—Trinidad and Tobago conducted 7,730 tests per million prior to August the 9th, whereas Grenada did 48,556 and Saint Lucia did 13,458?

Madam Speaker: Minister of Health.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. The answer is very simple. Each country put in place its own mechanisms to deal with COVID-19. For instance, we were the first country in the western hemisphere on January 30th to stop the travel from people from China; you must have spent 14 days outside to come in here. The other public health measures, including what is commonly referred to as a “lockdown”, indicated there was a total drop in acute viral illness which the CMO has said over and over, testing is a function of what viral illnesses are circulating at the time.

And, whenever you have a serious drop in acute viral illness, our policy which has always been to test symptomatic people, according to Dr. Tedros when he said, “test, test, test”, taken out of context by the Member of Parliament for Siparia, Dr. Tedros went on to say, “test, test, test all symptomatic people, isolate and treat”, and that was the policy we were engaged in. We were not testing asymptomatic people.

So Trinidad and Tobago adhered to WHO policy. All the measures we put in place resulted in a dramatic decrease in acute viral illness, which you saw manifested in our hospital admissions for everything, from gastroenteritis to everything, and that is why our testing rate was as it was. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Thank you, Madam Speaker. The WHO indicated that the only way you could get a sense of the pervasiveness of the coronavirus was to do testing—

Madam Speaker: Member—

Mr. Charles:—and the question I am asking—

Madam Speaker: Okay, because you have 15 seconds to ask a question. Okay, the question.

Mr. Charles: The question is, why did Grenada and all other—most countries in the Caricom adopt the broader testing policy than Trinidad and Tobago?

Madam Speaker: Okay. So, I am not going to allow a question asking about Grenada. I do not think this Member is entitled to answer why Grenada did such a thing. Okay? So I will not allow that as a supplemental.

Mr. Charles: The question says, compared to Caricom.

Madam Speaker: Do you have another question you wish to ask? Excuse me?

Mr. Charles: I said, no. No, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: All right. So just as a warning, certain gestures may be interpreted—Member for Naparima—Member for Naparima—

Mr. Charles: I am listening.

Madam Speaker: No. I believe I am speaking to you. Certain gestures may be misinterpreted. So for this time I will take your gesture as the best way that I can. Please watch your gesture.

Registered and Non-Registered Venezuelans

(Recording Protocols for Births)

40. Mr. Rodney Charles (*Naparima*) asked the hon. Minister of Health:

Could the Minister state the protocols that are used at public health facilities to accurately record births by:

- a) registered Venezuelan nationals; and
- b) non-registered Venezuelan nationals?

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much

again, Madam Speaker. The protocols that are used at public health facilities to accurately record births of registered and non-registered Venezuelan nationals are outlined in the medical records policy and procedures manual. These protocols are administered by the medical records department and include the following: one, the registration of pregnant women at antenatal clinics, inclusive of demographics in the labour ward book. Two, the registration and certification of the birth by the hospital's birth registry. And, thirdly, the subsequent data reporting to the Registrar General's office at the Central Statistical Office under confidential seal. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Could the Minister provide information with respect to the numbers of children born to registered Venezuelan nationals and non-registered Venezuelan nationals?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, I am sure if the Member asks the appropriate question and gives me the appropriate time, I will surely provide that information once it is freely available. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Thank you. Could the Minister indicate whether the protocols imply, suggest a liaison with the Ministry of National Security so we could get a sense of how many non-registered nationals are in Trinidad and Tobago?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, I thought I was "pellucidly" clear by outlining the three methods by which they record the data that the hon. Member asked for. I could repeat it if you would like.

Mr. Charles: No.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: One, the registration of pregnant women at antenatal clinics,

inclusive of demographics and labour ward book. Two, the registration and certification of the birth at the hospital's birth registry. And, thirdly, the subsequent data reporting, and we report the data to the Registrar General's office and the Central Statistical Office under confidential seal. Thank you very much, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Naparima.

Mr. Charles: Could the Minister indicate then for the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago, the proportion of children born to non-registered Venezuelan nationals?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Madam Speaker, again, I would not have that granular detail offhand. Again, if the Member poses the question in the appropriate format and I have the appropriate time to research that data, it can be provided once it is freely available. I thank you again.

Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard

(Details of Vessels)

45. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of National Security:

With regard Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard (TTCG) vessels, could the Minister state:

- a) the total number of vessels owned by the TTCG as at September 21, 2020;
- b) the total number of seaworthy vessels in operation as at September 21, 2020;
- c) the total number of vessels in need of repair as at September 21, 2020; and
- d) the number of vessels utilized each day to patrol our national borders?

The Minister of National Security and Minister in the Office of the Prime

Minister (Hon. Stuart Young): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard currently has 13 seaworthy vessels in operation. However, the specifics of the operations of the coast guard is a matter of national security and should not be placed in the public domain as it does compromise our national security.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Minister of National Security, but you just stated how many vessels are on patrol—I think you—is it 3-0 you said or 1-3?

Hon. S. Young: Thirteen.

Mr. Lee: Yeah, 13. Sorry. My questions a), b), c), could you explain why these cannot be answered, those three questions?

Madam Speaker: I believe the Minister cited national security reasons with respect to all the other sub-questions of the question.

Mr. Lee: Okay.

Government-Guaranteed Soft Loans

(Details of Applicants)

46. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

With regard to the Government-guaranteed soft loan programme for small and medium enterprises in an amount of \$300 million to be administered by First Citizens Bank Limited, could the Minister indicate:

- a) the number of business entities or individuals who have applied for this soft loan programme as at September 21, 2020;
- b) the number of business entities which have received these soft loans as at September 21, 2020;
- c) the number of individuals who have received these soft loans as at September 21, 2020; and

- d) the total amount lent or expended under this programme as at September 21, 2020?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Answer to part a): As of September the 21st, 2020, the total number of business entities or individuals who had applied for this government-guaranteed COVID relief soft loan programme was 327. Answer to part b): 137 business entities, partnerships and limited liability companies had received loans as of that same day. Answer to part c): Five individuals, sole traders had received loans. Answer to part d): The total lent under this programme as of the 21st of September, 2020, was \$21,175,000.

Point Lisas Industrial Estate

(Shutdown of Petrochemical Plants)

- 13. Mr. David Lee** (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) asked the hon. Minister of Energy and Energy Industries:

Could the Minister state the number of petrochemical plants which have shut down operations either permanently or temporarily at the Point Lisas Industrial Estate for the period September 01, 2019 to September 01, 2020?

The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis): Madam Speaker, on behalf of the Minister of Energy and Energy Industries, during the period September 01, 2019 to September 01, 2020, operations at one petrochemical plant at the Point Lisas Industrial Estate was shut down permanently. Another plant was closed indefinitely, and operations at four plants were suspended temporarily.

Specifically, the Yara ammonia plant was closed permanently pre-COVID in December 2019. As a very old, small and inefficient plant the owners decided that it was no longer economical to continue operations. The Nutrien 03 ammonia plant

was closed initially for maintenance, but subsequently was closed indefinitely due to depressed world ammonia crisis. The Methanex Titan plant is closed temporarily due to depressed world methanol prices.

Operations at three other plants, Nutrien 02 ammonia plant, TTMC M3 methanol plant and CMC M2 methanol plant, were also suspended for short periods due to the depressed world prices or a turnaround. However, despite the continued depressed world market for petrochemical products, NGC has successfully collaborated with the owners of these latter companies and as a result these three plants have restarted operations. Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Pointe-a-Pierre.

Mr. Lee: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Minister, based on your last response of the successful negotiations with NGC to these three plants, could you state if it was a renegotiation on the gas prices to them?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. C. Robinson-Regis: Madam Speaker, as the Member well knows, we do not normally discuss the pricing in the public domain, and as a consequence of that, I am not going to answer that part of the question.

Ministry of Labour

(Reports of Retrenchment/Layoff Due to COVID-19)

48. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Labour:

Could the Minister state how many formal reports of retrenchment/layoff have been submitted to the Ministry since March 21, 2020, the onset of restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic?

The Minister of Labour (Hon. Stephen Mc Clashie): Madam Speaker, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to respond to this very pertinent question raised by

the Member for Couva South. I wish to inform that pursuant to section 4 of the Retrenchment and Severance Benefits Act, Chap. 88:13, where an employer proposes to terminate the services of five or more workers for the reason of redundancy, he is required to give formal notice of termination in writing to each worker involved to the recognized majority union and to the Minister of Labour. Accordingly, for the period March 21, 2020 to October 01, 2020, 98 notices of retrenchment were submitted to the Ministry of Labour. These notices were in respect of 1,891 persons who were identified to be retrenched.

It should be noted that with the exception of retrenchment there is no statutory obligation on employers in Trinidad and Tobago to report other forms of termination of employment to the Ministry of Labour. I thank you, Madam Speaker.

Rental Assistance/Self-Employed Grants

(Distribution Number re COVID-19 Pandemic)

49. Mr. David Lee (*Pointe-a-Pierre*) on behalf of Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh (*Couva South*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance:

Could the Minister state the number of rental assistance and self-employed grants that have been distributed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic as at September 25, 2020?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): You want me to answer it?

Madam Speaker: Question No. 49.

Hon. C. Imbert: Certainty, Madam Speaker. This is really a question for the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services, but I can answer it. As of September the 25th, 2020, the number of rental assistance, income support and food support grants distributed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic were as follows. Rental assistance: number of beneficiaries, 3,770; expenditure, \$16,317,810.

Income support: 47,330 beneficiaries; expenditure, \$144,402,750. Food support: the number of beneficiaries, 48,922; expenditure, \$74,850,660.

Number of Salary Relief Grants Issued

(March 31, 2020 to September 25, 2020)

50. Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance: Could the Minister state the total number of salary relief grants issued from March 31, 2020 to September 25, 2020 disaggregated by constituency?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. From the initial disbursement on April the 27th, 2020 to September the 25th, 2020, a total of 81,100 salary relief grants were made to 33,734 persons at a value of \$129,471,862. The breakdown is as follows: the first tranche payments, the number of grants paid, 29,945; the value of payments, \$42,631,660. The second tranche payments, the number of grants, 25,509; the value of payments, \$38,043,576. The third tranche payments, the number of grants, 21,857; value of payments, 32,769,200. And there were also a series of single payments comprising all three tranches totalling 3,789 grants at a value of \$16,027,426 for a grand total of 81,100 grants valued at 129,471,862.

Madam Speaker, the database created by the salary relief grant unit was not created to capture information by constituency since no consideration whatsoever was given to providing grants by constituency. Indeed, the Government's COVID-19 relief programme is entirely unpolitical, and salary relief grants were provided to all those who qualified for this assistance and who submitted correctly filled out applications with all necessary supporting documentation, regardless of where they live.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental.

Ms. Mohit: Madam Speaker, at any point in time would this system be refined to

facilitate the constituencies so that we can get totals by constituencies?

Madam Speaker: Minister.

Hon. C. Imbert: There is no plan to do that at this point in time. As I indicated, all persons who applied who qualified will be paid regardless of where they live.

Salary Relief Grant Expenditure

(Details of)

51. Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance: With regard to the expenditure of \$112 million on salary relief grants, could the Minister state whether:

- (a) the total sum of \$112 million was expended exclusively on the grants and if not;
- (b) what quantum constitutes administrative expenses and/or any other related costs?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Answer to part a): The quoted amount of 112 million, which was, as of August the 14th, 2020, was expended exclusively on salary relief grants. Answer to part b): Administrative expenses are accounted for separately. As of August the 14th, 2020, the administrative expenses for the salary relief grant programme was \$2.85 million or less than 3 per cent of the value of the grants given out.

Madam Speaker: Supplemental, Member for Chaguanas East?

Rejected Salary Relief Grant Applications

(Disaggregation by Constituency)

52. Ms. Vandana Mohit (*Chaguanas East*) asked the hon. Minister of Finance: Could the Minister state the total number of salary relief grant applications rejected as at September 25, 2020 disaggregated by constituency?

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you, Madam Speaker. As

of September 25, 2020, the total number of salary relief grant applications that had not been approved for payment was 17,046. Applications were not entertained for a variety of reasons, including persons who had lost their jobs prior to the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions or who were dismissed or laid off for reasons other than COVID-19, or had no proof of citizenship or no identification card or other form of identification, or no certification from their employers of loss of employment, or no statutory declarations, or the forms were unsigned, or the bank accounts submitted were invalid, or the persons were not registered on the NIS system or submitted invalid NIS numbers, or the persons were underage or overage, and so on.

As I said before, the database created by the salary relief grant unit was not created to capture information by constituency since no consideration whatsoever is given to providing grants by constituency. The Government's COVID-19 relief programme is entirely unpolitical, and salary relief grants are provided to all those who qualify for this assistance who submit correctly filled out applications with all necessary supporting documentation, regardless of where they live.

EXPIRATION OF QUESTION TIME

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, question time is now spent. I would like to inform the House that at the request of the Whip, all questions not raised at today's sitting will stand over to the next sitting of the House. And also, Written Questions No. 4 and 43 have been deferred for two weeks.

Question time having expired, the following questions (53, 54, 55, 58, 59 and 60) were not dealt with.

Tableland Water Supply Project

(Details of)

53. Could the hon. Minister of Public Utilities state:

- (a) whether the proposed \$70 million project to improve water supply in the Tableland area is a priority of the Government; and
- (b) the expected commencement date of the project? [*Mr. Padarath*]

Princes Town and Environs Water Schedule

54. Could the hon. Minister of Public Utilities state:

In light of the irregular water supply in the Princes Town constituency over the past six months, could the Minister state when an updated and accurate water schedule for Princes Town and environs area will be published? [*Mr. Padarath*]

Garth Road

(Commencement of Rehabilitation Works)

55. Could the hon. Minister of Works and Transport state the expected commencement date for rehabilitation works on Garth Road? [*Mr. Padarath*]

Number of Returning T&T Nationals

58. Could the hon. Minister of National Security state the number of Trinidad and Tobago nationals who returned to our country since August 10, 2020? [*Dr. Bodoë*]

Returning T&T Nationals

(Number of Positive COVID-19 Tests)

59. Could the hon. Minister of Health state the number of Trinidad and Tobago nationals who have tested positive for COVID-19 upon returning from abroad since August 10, 2020? [*Dr. Bodoë*]

D'Abadie Avenue ECCE Centre, Forest Reserve Anglican

Primary School and Siparia East Secondary School

(Status of Construction)

Expiration of Question Time (cont'd)

2020.11.09

60. Could the hon. Minister Education state the status of construction of the following schools:

- (a) D'Abadie Avenue ECCE Centre in Avocat;
- (b) Forest Reserve Anglican Primary School; and
- (c) Siparia East Secondary School? [*Dr. Bodoë*]

ANTI-GANG (AMDT.) BILL, 2020

Bill to amend the Anti-Gang Act, 2018 to extend its duration [*The Attorney General and Minister of Legal Affairs*]; read the first time.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

(APPOINTMENT TO)

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

Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Public Accounts Committee:

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo, MP	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy, MP	Member
Mr. Adrian Leonce, MP	Member
Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Member

Question put and agreed to.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS (ENTERPRISES) COMMITTEE

(APPOINTMENT TO)

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

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Public Accounts (Enterprises) Committee:

Mr. Ruston Paray, MP	Member
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Mr. Fitzgerald Hinds, MP	Member
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Mr. Keith Scotland, MP	Member
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Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly, MP	Member
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Question put and agreed to.

JOINT SELECT COMMITTEE

(APPOINTMENT TO)

Public Administration and Appropriations

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

Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following five Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee on Public Administration and Appropriations:

Mrs. Bridgid Annisette-George, MP	Member
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Dr. Lackram Bodoë, MP	Member
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Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy, MP	Member
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Mr. Stephen Mc Clashie, MP	Member
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Mrs. Lisa Morris-Julian, MP	Member
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Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

2.30 p.m.

Foreign Affairs

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

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee on Foreign Affairs:

Mr. Rodney Charles, MP	Member
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Mr. Brian Manning, MP	Member
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Joint Select Committee (cont'd)

2020.11.09

Mr. Terrence Deyalsingh, MP	Member
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Mrs. Shamfa Cudjoe, MP	Member
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Question put and agreed to.

Human Rights, Equality and Diversity

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

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights, Equality and Diversity:

Mr. Barry Padarath, MP	Member
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Dr. Nyan Gadsby-Dolly, MP	Member
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Mrs. Lisa Morris-Julien, MP	Member
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Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
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Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Finance and Legal Affairs

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

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee on Finance and Legal Affairs:

Mr. Dinesh Rambally, MP	Member
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Mr. Keith Scotland, MP	Member
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Mr. Marvin Gonzales, MP	Member
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Mr. Terrence Deyalsingh, MP	Member
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Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Land and Physical Infrastructure

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

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee on Land and Physical Infrastructure:

Mr. Saddam Hosein, MP	Member
Mr. Kennedy Richards, MP	Member
Mrs. Lisa Morris-Julien, MP	Member
Mr. Symon de Nobriga, MP	Member

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Social Services and Public Administration**The Minister of Planning and Development (Hon. Camille Robinson-Regis):**

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration:

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP	Member
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Ms. Penelope Beckles, MP	Member
Mr. Roger Monroe, MP	Member

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

**Local Authorities, Service Commissions and
Statutory Authorities (Including the THA)**

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

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee on

Joint Select Committee (cont'd)

2020.11.09

Local Authorities, Service Commissions and Statutory Authorities (Including the THA):

Ms. Khadijah Ameen, MP	Member
Hon. Lisa Morris-Julien, MP	Member
Mr. Esmond Forde, MP	Member
Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy, MP	Member

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

State Enterprises

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

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee on State Enterprises:

Mr. David Lee, MP	Member
Mr. Foster Cummings, MP	Member
Mr. Stephen Mc Clashie, MP	Member
Mr. Adrian Leonce, MP	Member

Question put and agreed to.

National Security

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

Madam Speaker, I beg to move that the following four Members be appointed to serve with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee on National Security:

Dr. Roodal Moonilal, MP	Member
Mr. Fitzgerald Hinds, MP	Member
Mr. Keith Scotland, MP	Member

Joint Select Committee (cont'd)

2020.11.09

Mrs. Ayanna Webster-Roy, MP Member

Provided that any Member who the committee by a majority determines has a conflict, be disqualified from the committee without recourse to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Cannabis Control Bill, 2020

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

Madam Speaker, subject to the concurrence of the Senate on the establishment of this committee, I beg to move that this House appoint the following six Members to sit with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee established to consider and report on the Cannabis Control Bill, 2020:

Mr. Faris Al-Rawi, MP

Mr. Stuart Young, MP

Mr. Fitzgerald Hinds, MP

Mr. Terrence Deyalsingh, MP

Mr. Rushton Paray, MP

Dr. Rai Ragbir, MP

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Constitution (Amdt.) (Tobago Self-Government) Bill, 2020

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

Madam Speaker, subject to the concurrence of the Senate on the establishment of this committee, I beg to move that this House appoint the following six Members to sit with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee established to consider and report on the Constitution (Amdt.) (Tobago Self-Government) Bill, 2020:

Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis, MP

Joint Select Committee (cont'd)

2020.11.09

Mr. Foster Cummings, MP

Mr. Faris Al-Rawi, MP

Ms. Shamfa Cudjoe, MP

Mr. Rudranath Indarsingh, MP

Mr. Dinesh Rambally, MP

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020

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

Madam Speaker, subject to the concurrence of the Senate on the establishment of this committee, I beg to move that this House appoint the following six Members to sit with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee established to consider and report on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill, 2020:

Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis, MP

Mrs. Lisa Morris-Julien, MP

Mr. Esmond Forde, MP

Mr. Keith Scotland, MP

Ms. Khadijah Ameen, MP

Ms. Vandana Mohit, MP

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Representation of the People (Amdt.) (No. 2) Bill, 2020

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

Madam Speaker, subject to the concurrence of the Senate on the establishment of this committee, I beg to move that this House appoint the following six Members

Joint Select Committee (cont'd)

2020.11.09

to sit with an equal number from the Senate on the Joint Select Committee established to consider and report on the Representation of the People (Amdt.) (No. 2) Bill, 2020:

Mrs. Camille Robinson-Regis, MP

Mr. Colm Imbert, MP

Ms. Shamfa Cudjoe, MP

Mr. Fitzgerald Hinds, MP

Mr. Saddam Hosein, MP

Mr. Davendranath Tancoo, MP

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Fisheries Management (No. 2) Bill, 2020

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

Madam Speaker, having regard to the correspondence from the President of the Senate, in relation to the establishment of the Joint Select Committee to consider and report on the Fisheries Management (No. 2) Bill, 2020, I beg to move that the House concur with the Senate in the establishment of the committee, and that the following Members be appointed to serve:

Mr. Stephen Mc Clashie, MP

Ms. Shamfa Cudjoe, MP

Mr. Kennedy Richards, MP

Mr. Brian Manning, MP

Mr. Ravi Ratiram, MP

Mr. Rushton Paray, MP

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

Shipping Bill, 2020

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

Madam Speaker, having regard to the correspondence from the President of the Senate, in relation to the establishment of the Joint Select Committee to consider and report on the Shipping Bill, 2020, I beg to move that the House concur with the Senate in the establishment of the committee, and that the following Members be appointed to serve:

Mr. Keith Scotland, MP
Mrs. Lisa Morris-Julien, MP
Mr. Marvin Gonzales, MP
Mrs. Penelope Beckles, MP
Mr. Dinesh Rambally, MP
Mr. Davendranath Tancoo, MP

Thank you, Madam Speaker.

Question put and agreed to.

COVID-19 Pandemic**(Speaking Time in Debates)**

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, you are reminded that as resolved by this House the time limit for speeches in debates during the period of the pandemic is as follows: 30 minutes for the mover and the first responder, with no extensions, and 20 minutes for all other speakers, with no extensions. I now call upon the Minister of Finance.

PROVISIONAL COLLECTION OF TAXES ORDER, 2020

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Madam Speaker, I beg to move the following Motion:

Whereas it is provided by section 3(1) of the Provisional Collection of Taxes

Act, Chap. 74:01 (hereinafter called “the Act” that where proposals for general or supplementary appropriation of public funds are made to the House of Representatives and are embodied in an Appropriation or Supplementary Appropriation Bill, the President may, for the purpose of raising revenue to meet the expenditure specified in any such Bill, by Order, provide for the imposition of a tax or the variation of an existing tax and from the date of the publication of the Order in the Trinidad and Tobago Gazette, the tax as imposed or varied shall be payable:

And whereas it is provided by section 3(5) of the Act that an Order varying an existing tax shall cease to have effect if the Order is not confirmed with or without modifications, by a resolution agreed to by the House within the next 21 days after the commencement of the Order:

And whereas the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2020, (hereinafter referred to as “the Order”) made under section 3 of the Act, provided for the variation of taxes in the written laws mentioned in the Order to the extent and in the manner set out therein, for the purpose of raising revenue to meet the expenditure specified in the Bill entitled “an Act to provide for the service of Trinidad and Tobago for the financial year ending on the 30th day of September, 2021”:

And whereas the Order was published in Trinidad and Tobago Gazette ad Legal Notice No. 344 of 2020 on the 20th day of October, 2020 and commenced on the 20th day of October, 2020:

And whereas it is expedient to confirm the Order:

Be it resolved that the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2020 be confirmed.

Provisional Collection of Taxes
Order, 2020 (cont'd)
Hon. C. Imbert (cont'd)

2020.11.09

Before I get into my presentation, Madam Speaker, just let me make some procedural points. The Act requires the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order to be confirmed in not less than four days, not more than 21 days. I believe today is either the 20th or the 19th day, and this is why we are here today to confirm this Provisional Collections of Taxes Order, 2020.

In addition, the Order only requires confirmation in the House of Representatives. It does not require Senate approval. It does not go to the Senate.

As I indicated just now, this is really a procedural matter required by law. There are a number of statements made in the budget statement of 2021, which referred to an intention on the part of the Government to increase taxes on certain items. This is one of them, and this one was put into effect by way of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order.

There are other ways of increasing taxes and duties on goods, by way of orders which flow from other legislation, by way of the Finance Bill of 2020, which we expect to debate in the first two weeks in December. So that the only matter mentioned in the budget that is the subject of this debate today is the increase in taxes on cigarettes and tobacco.

I wanted to say these things, Madam Speaker, so that we do not get distracted with other announcements with respect to increase in taxes on other items. This Order is very, very specific to the tobacco and cigarette industry, and it speaks to nothing else. All of the other matters mentioned in the budget will be dealt with in due course in other ways, including possibly a Miscellaneous Provisions Bill and certainly the Finance Bill, 2020.

Before I go into the actual subject matter of the Order, I wish to speak a little bit about tobacco and the health risks of smoking tobacco. And this is a bit of déjà

vu for me, because as Minister of Health in 2002, I went to Geneva and signed the convention or the agreement that nearly every country in the world had agreed to at that time, to institute a programme of the control of tobacco and the reduction in the use of tobacco. That was following work done by my predecessors at the time, the former Minister of Health before I came in, in 2001. All Ministers of Health after me have followed through on our signing of that convention agreement, and we have got to the present day where we have a Tobacco Control Act, which was also done by a Minister of Health between 2002 through to 2010. I believe that was the hon. Jerry Narace who was Minister of Health under the Manning administration.

I think it is necessary for people to understand why we are doing this. I have taken some information from the American Cancer Society and it is very relevant to Trinidad and Tobago. I will get to Trinidad and Tobago in a while, but let me deal with the American situation.

It is said that about half of all Americans who keep smoking will die because of that habit, that bad habit. In the United States, more than 480,000 people every year die from illnesses related to tobacco use. That means that every year smoking causes one out of five deaths in the United States. I think it is a sine qua non, that cigarette smokers die younger than non-smokers. I do not think we need science to tell us that. But the science tells us that smoking shortens the lives of males by 12 years, and females by 11 years. It not only causes cancer, tobacco use damages nearly every organ in the body, including the lungs, the heart, blood vessels, reproductive organs, the mouth, the skin, the eyes, the bones, and so on. And smoking accounts for about 30 per cent of all cancer deaths in the United States, including 80 per cent of all lung cancer deaths. Lung cancer is the leading cause of

cancer death in both men and women, and one of the hardest cancers to treat.

Smoking is not just dangerous in terms of lung cancer, it is also a risk factor for cancers of the mouth, the larynx, the pharynx, the esophagus, the kidney, the cervix, the liver, the bladder, the pancreas, the stomach, the colon, and it is a risk factor for leukemia. There is no safe way to use tobacco, absolutely none.

The problem is that tobacco companies, it is a very lucrative industry. Tobacco companies market their product as somehow being glamorous and fashionable, and if you smoke you will become wealthy and so on. I mean, the ads are quite incredible. In 2018, I am told that cigarette and smokeless tobacco products were advertised by various companies in the United States to the tune of US \$9 billion. That will give you some idea of the amount of money that is spent marketing tobacco and cigarettes in the United States. In fact, a cigarette and tobacco company spent US \$25 million every single day marketing cigarettes and tobacco, TT \$150 million.

With respect to Trinidad and Tobago, I am told that more than 33 per cent of adult males—or it is said that more than 33 per cent of adult males and 10 per cent of adult females use or have used tobacco or tobacco-related products. What I am told, and it is quite shocking, is that we in Trinidad and Tobago have the fourth highest incidence of smoking among 13- to 15-year-olds in this region. It is a very serious risk factor for us in Trinidad and Tobago. The top three causes of premature death, measured in terms of years of life lost, are tobacco-use related: ischemic heart disease, diabetes and cerebrovascular disease.

3.00 p.m.

Cigarettes also affect the risk of coronary heart disease. It is the most important risk factor for young men and women and especially for those under the

age of 50. Our tobacco company is no stranger to marketing and promotion and lobbying and so on, they operate exactly in the same way as the international companies; in fact, they are affiliated with international companies. So let us go to the actual measure itself.

We have decided that we wish to continue to de-incentivize smoking. It has been shown and this is based on studies given to me that have been done by various health authorities, it has been shown that increases in taxes on tobacco in Trinidad and Tobago do exert downward pressure on consumption.

So we have decided again as a health move—I indicated in the budget that the cost of taking care of one person suffering from lung cancer in Trinidad and Tobago is \$500,000, half a million dollars. So we have decided consistent with many other countries in the world and, in fact, it is interesting as we were preparing for the budget I got two letters. I got one letter from the Cancer Society of Trinidad and Tobago which indicated that our taxes on tobacco are among the lowest in the world, a fraction of what obtains in other countries, and a number of articles and papers and statistics on what cancer does and the damage that tobacco does to people and how it causes cancer and so on. So I got one letter from the Trinidad and Tobago Cancer Society urging us to increase taxes on tobacco to de-incentivize its use. And I got a second letter from Witco urging me not to increase taxes on tobacco.

So we have decided for health reasons, as I said, it costs half a million dollars to take care of one patient with lung cancer, so we have decided to continue with the system of de-incentivizing smoking, and this Order will lead to a 20 per cent increase in excise duty on locally manufactured tobacco products. And I might just explain what “excise” means. You have customs duty which is imported

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products manufactured overseas, and excise duty on particular products manufactured here.

[*Device goes off*] The main items on which excise duty is imposed are tobacco and alcohol. [*Madam Speaker stands*]

I am sorry, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The Member with the offending device, please leave the Chamber, sort out their device and they can come back in about 10 minutes once they have got it sorted out.

Hon. C. Imbert: And make him stay out for the day. A 20 per cent increase in customs duty on imported tobacco products of common market origin, so that is products within Caricom. An adjustment to the customs duty payable on tobacco products imported into Trinidad and Tobago from extra-regional sources so that they will receive equal treatment to those produced in the common market. And that is what was announced in the budget but what we have decided to do is to take another look at tobacco products from extra-regional sources and therefore, what this Order actually did was implement or seek to implement a 20 per cent increase in excise duty on locally manufactured tobacco products, 20 per cent increase in customs duty on imported tobacco products of common market origin, a 20 per cent increase in customs duty on tobacco products imported from extra-regional sources, and a 20 per cent increase in tobacco tax payable under the Miscellaneous Taxes Act on tobacco products imported from extra-regional sources. What this means is that there are two types of taxes on tobacco imported from extra-regional sources, a tobacco tax and a customs duty.

As I have said before and it is quite obvious from the preamble from the resolution itself, that when you publish the Order which varies a tax, the Order will

cease to have effect if it is not confirmed by resolution of the House within 21 days after the commencement of the Order.

So quite simply, Madam Speaker, we are here today to agree to the resolution to confirm the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order. The Order itself contains six paragraphs, two of which are quite standard namely paragraph 1 which is the citation, paragraph 6 which details the commencement date which was the 20th of October, 2020. These new taxes and duties are already in effect. The four remaining substantive paragraphs amend the laws under which the duties and taxes payable on tobacco products are changed.

Paragraph 2 of the Order amended the Miscellaneous Taxes Act, Chap. 77:01 by repealing Part II of Sixth Schedule and substituting a new Part II. The Sixth Schedule corresponds to Part V of the Miscellaneous Taxes Act which established the tobacco tax which I have just explained is imposed on tobacco of extra-regional origin. And more particularly the section 34(2) of that Act which states:

“A tax called tobacco tax shall be charged on smoking tobacco, cigarettes and cigars of non-Common Market origin imported into Trinidad and Tobago at the rates set out in Part II of the Six Schedule.”

The new Sixth Schedule reflects the 20 per cent increase in taxes for the tobacco products listed in the Schedule which include cigarettes, cigars and smoking tobacco.

Paragraph 3 of the Order amended the First Schedule of the Customs Act, Chap. 78:01, by deleting the current rates of duty and inserting new rates of duty which also represent a 20 per cent increase.

The First Schedule of the Customs Act indicates the rates of duty for goods

originating outside of the Caricom region. This amendment therefore causes a 20 per cent increase in duty for tobacco products originating from extra-regional sources.

You may wish to know, Madam Speaker, that this increase in duty is in addition to the 20 per cent increase in tobacco tax which is also payable on extra-regional tobacco products as I have said before.

Paragraph 4 of the Order amends the Customs (Import Duty) (Caribbean Common Market) Order which is published as Legal Notice No. 50 of 1980. This Order sets the import duty for goods originating in the common market, that is, from Caricom territories. Instead of a percentage of the value of goods, the rate of duty is a set dollar value which is applied to goods as described in the Order. The previous common market rates of duty were increased by 20 per cent by this amendment.

And finally, Madam Speaker, at paragraph 5, the Order amends the Excise Duty (Tobacco Products) Order, Legal Notice No. 162 of 2016, that is when we had previously increased taxes on tobacco products. That Order stipulates the excise duty payable on locally manufactured tobacco products. And it should be noted that in keeping with the Treaty of Chaguaramas which established and governs Caricom, the duty payable in Trinidad and Tobago must be equal to goods originating from the common market. Therefore, the increased rates of excise duty are equal to the increased rates of customs duty on tobacco products from the common market. Accordingly, a 20 per cent increase in excise duty was also implemented on the publication of the Order.

I am hopeful, Madam Speaker, that this increase in duties and taxes on tobacco products will incentivize persons or de-incentivize persons in the case of

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the use of tobacco and will encourage persons who continue to smoke to make the final decision to abandon the smoking habit. I cannot stress this more.

And in closing, Madam Speaker, I have had many dear friends who have fallen prey to cancer as a result of smoking. In fact, some years ago I discovered that one of the most prevalent forms of cancer that comes from smoking is not lung cancer, lung cancer is obvious but bladder cancer, Madam Speaker. I was shocked to learn when a friend of mine died from bladder cancer, and very quickly too, within a month. I was shocked to learn that bladder cancer is the second most prevalent form of cancer that arises from cigarette smoking. The effects on the human body are terrible, it leads to heart disease which in itself will lead to strokes, death and all sorts of problems. So I sincerely hope that hon. Members opposite will have recognized the need to curtail and de-incentivize the use of tobacco and tobacco products and will join with us in supporting this Order. I beg to move, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

Question proposed.

Madam Speaker: Member for Mayaro. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Rushton Paray (Mayaro): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, thank you very much for acknowledging me to respond to the Minister of Finance as he has just laid the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act, the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2020. As the Minister identified, this is a very simple Motion/Bill before us today because it speaks to the adjustment to the law of four pieces of legislation which the intention is to curtail the smoking habit of the citizens of Trinidad and Tobago with specific reference to the improvement in health and wellness conditions.

Madam Speaker, what is the purpose of taxes? Taxes have three main

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functions; to raise revenue in order to provide goods and services for the country; two, to regulate supply and demand in order to throttle micro-economic levers from time to time; and thirdly, to disincentivise consumption for various reasons, in this case according to the Minister, one grounded on health and safety.

Madam Speaker, on the surface of this Bill it sounds innocuous enough as it is really part of the annual post-budget procedural matter where the Minister comes to the House whereby he is turning some regulation into law. While our Constitution, Madam Speaker, gives the Minister the power and authority to raise taxes by regulation, it is only when a debate is raised in this House and the Bill as it is before us today, that the impact to the citizenry is fully articulated.

It is my contention, Madam Speaker, that this procedure of raising taxes by regulation without proper ventilation on the Parliament floor, while not illegal, it can be perceived to the citizens to be a bit undemocratic and unethical if they wish to look at it that way.

Madam Speaker, a wise and caring Minister can choose to bring the law first, have it discussed on the Parliament floor and then rolled out accordingly. That is how a caring Government should operate in a difficult time like which we find ourselves in.

Madam Speaker, the increased customs and excise duties that were identified in the finance Minister's budget address on October 5th, he described it as disincentives to constrain the smoking habit. Both in the budget address on that day and today's presentation, the measures were cloaked in an almost altruistic term as designed to combat the significant negative impact of tobacco use. But, Madam Speaker, that is where I think the humanity and the good intentions begin and end. You see, a leopard cannot change its spots, and taxation on tobacco

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products and alcohol is an age-old trademark of this administration dating back to the Dr. Williams era.

Madam Speaker, it is our view on this side that the matter that we are considering in this House today is purely a revenue-generation measure, nothing else. It is cloaked under the guise of health but it is purely for revenue generation. Madam Speaker, it was—

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance, I am being disturbed.

Mr. R. Paray: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, it was during the George Chambers administration between 1981 and 1986, that his PNM government morally branded those measures as “sin taxes” which we now refer to when we put taxes on alcohol and cigarettes. And there is the understanding that even when the taxes were raised on these items, it rarely ever cuts consumption in significant ways because there is the perception that because it is a sin tax, people will continue using it.

Madam Speaker, in the 1985 budget presentation, the then Prime Minister Chambers introduced a Provisional Collection of Taxes Order in which he increased taxes on alcohol and tobacco products and a range of other consumer items. In inflating tobacco taxes, the then Prime Minister took a very ethical and principled outlook, just as the Member for Diego Martin North/East did today in his budget—back then in his budget address and in his presentation today.

But, Madam Speaker, if I were to draw your attention to January 25, 1985, in an article that was published by the recently deceased Mr. Owen Baptiste, journalist extraordinaire, he stated in an article on that day, and I could quote him, Madam Speaker:

By identifying the details of these hikes in the Provisional Collection of

Taxes Order, Prime Minister Chambers succeeded in seducing this gullible population into thinking at least for a few weeks that his government is still pursuing a benevolent policy of taking from the rich and giving to the poor. Except that on this occasion, Madam Speaker, the Finance Minister has altered the playbook a bit and he is seeking to save Trinidad and Tobago from the ravages of ill health. The Minister of Finance, Madam Speaker, is attempting to become, I would say, a Florence Nightingale today in his presentation. But what he did not do, Madam Speaker, was to seek to deal with tobacco use in a holistic manner through preventative and rehabilitative measures using the taxing mechanisms to foster those two areas. The Minister's sole concern was in raising taxes while appearing to shed a bit of tears about the health and welfare of the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Madam Speaker, the Minister should tell that to the thousands of ailing patients who are awaiting surgeries in the nation's hospitals.

Madam Speaker, the Government of the Kamla Persad-Bissessar administration from 2010 to 2015, initiated several measures to develop and foster a healthier nation. There was priority focus on health care and wellness and in the development of a nation of healthy and fit citizens. However, the report card of this administration, Madam Speaker, is exactly the opposite.

Madam Speaker, would you believe in a country where there is an average of about 3,000 cancer cases that pop up annually and approximately 1,200 deaths a year, this administration last year scrapped the construction of the oncology centre. Now, if the position of the Minister today is that we are putting taxes to reduce the use of tobacco and tobacco-related products in an effort to assist our citizens, well, then it goes contradictory to the position that was held last year that they are going to stop the construction of this particular facility.

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Madam Speaker, I would like to refer you to the 16 February, 2019, Trinidad *Newsday*, where the Minister of Health did notify this House signalling the mothballing of the national oncology centre. Madam Speaker, this Government felt that priority should be given to the reconstruction of the residence of the Prime Minister in Tobago at a cost of \$18 million rather than to put it towards the oncology centre.

Madam Speaker, in his budget address the Minister of Finance spoke about, you know, the ferries and so on and the money that we are going to spend in that and spend in the Toco port but yet I am amazed that the Minister can come here today, talk about health, talk about wellness, talk about wanting to save the citizens but yet we could not pursue the oncology centre. Madam Speaker, that is a shame. [*Desk thumping*]

The Government, Madam Speaker, says today that they are concerned about the incidence and the treatment of cancer in this country, but the truth is, Madam Speaker, that what it seems like this collection, this Provisional Collection of Taxes Order is about passing a hat around to raise funds and not about the health and welfare of this nation. Madam Speaker, this taxation measure is really a desperate and barren effort of a government that has failed spectacularly in its administration of the national economy. [*Desk thumping*] The raw fact, Madam Speaker, is that the increased duties on tobacco products represent another rake and scrape taxation measure of a visionless tax-spend administration.

Madam Speaker, today what we are debating has nothing to do with, as the Minister of Finance would have said in his budget presentation, the negative consequences associated with the high consumption of these products. It has all to do with raising money here and there and everywhere without a systemic strategic

plan.

Madam Speaker, discipline, investment and innovation. If I were to quote, again, from that very famous article by journalist Owen Baptiste in 1985, it speaks to where we are today. And I quote him, Madam Speaker:

It is clear that the Government now sees itself to be incapable of raising the national output, through work, discipline, investment and innovation and has given up on the challenge of dealing decisively with our economic problems. Madam Speaker, as it was back in the 1980s, so it is today. We see that the Government rather than trying to be innovative solutions-driven in terms of raising revenue to take this economy forward, they have gone back to the old system of tax and tax and tax. Madam Speaker, I fear that more of this is coming and obviously we will not speak about those items but I know more various types of taxes on the citizens will be coming later on.

Madam Speaker, the Prime Minister—Mr. Chambers, Prime Minister Chambers, he had spread such a wide tax net back then, that I am fearful that using the same playbook, this administration is going to do the same thing, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, what was missing in the Minister of Finance's delivery today that surprised me was, what are the options that can be used with the taxes that will be collected? So we are increasing the taxes on a number of tobacco and tobacco products, what can be done with the taxes? Madam Speaker, the Minister of Finance spoke nothing about educational awareness. Can we take some of this revenue that we are raising on these taxes to put a greater focus on educational awareness onto the dangerous effect of the consumption of tobacco and tobacco products? Where is the investment in educational awareness? There was no

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mention of that. The Minister spoke about teenage use which is at a very dangerous level in this country, Madam Speaker, but yet the Minister failed to say one word whether the revenue generated under this measure can be used towards combating or giving more educational awareness to our teenagers in our school system about the dangers of using tobacco and tobacco products.

Madam Speaker, another area that I feel strongly that the Minister missed in his presentation this morning was an opportunity to use some of the revenue that will be raised from this measure in terms of looking at research and development in nicotine-replacement therapy. Madam Speaker, it is my understanding that the research and development can spawn an entire local industry in the manufacturing of transdermal patches, nicotine lozenges, nicotine gums and oral sprays to combat or curtail the use of tobacco products.

Madam Speaker, when you look at the innovativeness of a country, these are some of the ways that you can use your taxing revenue to drive innovation, to create business, to create small business. Those opportunities can swoop up the additional labour that we have. Young people from our UTT, our UWI who are graduating in sciences, biology, chemistry, we can bring them into the workforce by being a bit innovative rather than punitive on these taxes.

Madam Speaker, I want to advance a couple of further reasons why I think this PNM administration cannot be taken seriously when it speaks about curbing the abuse of tobacco and tobacco products in this country. Madam Speaker, this is the very same Government that rushed during the heights of the COVID-19 shutdown to resume the operation of a local tobacco manufacturer mid-year.

Madam Speaker, on May 9th, while most national operations were closed, the Prime Minister announced that three manufacturers were granted permission to

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resume activities. One was TCL which is our cement manufacturer, Nu Iron, a steel producer, and West Indian Tobacco which makes tobacco products. So, Madam Speaker, this is the same conundrum that I find myself in, that the Minister could come here today and lay foundation for the increase in taxes on tobacco squarely on the desire of protecting the health and wellness of our citizens but in the height of the COVID pandemic when we have so many other industries, we have so many manufacturers dealing in petroleum, refined petroleum, ammonia, we have had downstream industrial products like chocolates, cosmetics but yet we have this Government choosing to reopen back the tobacco company but yet we come here today and lay foundation that these taxes are to protect the citizens, I find that a bit strange, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker, another issue that I feel that the Minister of Finance failed to look at or to address in his presentation today is the increase in the illicit trade in tobacco and tobacco products. Madam Speaker, what is the connecting rod between the increase in taxes and the illicit trade? If I were to just draw your attention to an article in the *Trinidad Newsday* on the 7th of April, 2018, "...Tobacco tax makes TT a smuggler's paradise". I could quote, Madam Speaker:

"THE taxation regime on tobacco products has made this country a 'smuggler's paradise'"—so said the—"managing director of the West Indian Tobacco Company...Jean-Pierre Du Coudray..."—and he has said—

"Over the years (the State) has taxed cigarettes so much that it's created a smuggler's paradise because the profits from illegal versus legal are so huge"—that the—"people are willing to take that risk."

Madam Speaker, if you understand the quantum of the taxes that have been levied on tobacco and tobacco products today, I am concerned that the heightening

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activity in the illegal tobacco trade is going to escalate and put us in severe problems going forward.

Madam Speaker, the Manufacturers' Association has repeatedly spoken out on this critical issue. The Minister failed to address that today in his presentation. In 2018, I recall, Madam Speaker, that the Manufacturers' Association, they set up this illegal trade desk to increase the awareness and to reduce the illegal trade activity.

I understand much of this illegal tobacco and tobacco products are coming through our porous borders, and it is also coming as well with much of the illegal immigrants that are coming into the country.

Madam Speaker, research has associated the illegal trade in cigarettes to issues of national security, economic loss from tax evasion, trademark infringements and the undermining of brand investments. Madam Speaker, this also curbs the Government's ability to get revenue from its value added tax, corporation taxes and other taxes. But this administration, Madam Speaker, has been indifferent to the seepage of these illicit imports because nothing has been mentioned either in the budget or even in the Minister's presentation today as to how are we going to deal with the effects when these taxes come on stream, which has already come on stream by the way, and the impact that it is going to have on our economy.

3.30 p.m.

Madam Speaker, my understanding is that most of these illegal tobacco and tobacco products are coming from China and Vietnam, and in 2016 when the Government had its last increase, which was 15 per cent, Mr. Coudray did claim that once the taxes went up more brands came in illegally into the country and it

not only affected sales in terms of revenue, it opened several dangers—it opened up several more dangers from a medical perspective, which I am sure that my colleagues to come will speak a bit more about that.

Madam Speaker, from a medical standpoint, all I would add with reference to the increase in taxes which leads to an increase in the interest of the illegal trade. When you have more and more of these illegal items coming through our porous border what you now have is a lot of goods that carries no certification from our Food and Drug Division, no approval from the Bureau of Standards, and it will open a world of hurt medically to our citizens. So, Madam Speaker, there must be a balance. When we are looking at the taxes regime specifically dealing with tobacco and tobacco products, we are trying to put health and wellness on one side but we are not addressing the other issues that can make it negative, can negate whatever benefits that we can achieve at the end of the day.

Madam Speaker, the Government has basically turned inwards in imposing taxes on citizens instead of attracting foreign investments, spurring economic growth by small and medium enterprises, supporting manufacturers, and perhaps privatizing some of the loss-making state enterprises. In this way they can generate the revenue that they are falling short rather than raising revenue through taxing the citizens. Madam Speaker, if you were to look just quickly at the four pieces of legislation, the taxes itself was pretty, in my respectful view, very high. If you look at the items that are being taxed from the Bill itself, you are looking at cigars, you are looking at a type of cigar called “cheroots”, which is basically what I understand they call it the “poor man’s cigar”. It is not of the Cuban class cigar. Then you have something called “cigarillos”, which is a thin mini cigarette, cigar. You have the general class of cigarettes, and then any other manufactured use of

tobacco.

But, Madam Speaker, when you look across the four pieces of legislation, when you look at the taxes legislation you are getting an increase on these products of between \$6 and \$12 per kilogram, you are getting an increase of about 88 cents per pack. When you look at the customs duties you are looking at an increase of 78 per cent customs duty on tobacco, unmanufactured tobacco leaves and so on. And for any manufactured tobacco products there is 40 per cent increase in duty. When you look at the Common Market Order you are looking at another 13 to \$26 per kilogram increase, you are looking at \$3.31 increase per pack, and the excise duty, to top it off, you are looking at another 6 to \$11 per kilogram. Madam Speaker, when you add all those increases together it is really not only going to put a shock into the pricing, which I want to make it very clear, we on this side support the intent of the Minister in terms of curbing smoking to deal with the issues of health emanating out of the use of tobacco, but there is no counter measure in the taxing regime to address the issues of the illegal trade, to address the issues of educational awareness, which I feel was missing in the Minister's delivery today.

So, Madam Speaker, in the last couple minutes that I have, I want to just revisit some issues that the Minister would have missed in his delivery. The Minister failed to discuss estimates on how much revenue he intends to raise by this measure. I did not get it in his delivery. The Minister has failed to advise what is the expected benefits in terms of targeted reduction of new medical cases as a result of the expected reduction in tobacco use? The Minister has failed to advise whether or not any of the revenue raised will be used to increase educational awareness of the danger of tobacco use. The Minister has failed to advise if any of the tax revenue collected will be used towards research and development in

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nicotine replacement therapy, as I suggested. The Minister has failed to advise this House of what if or any new measures, or strengthening of existing measures will be instituted in the illegal tobacco trade in Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order would provide only some short-term and fleeting financial support to this Government, but it would do nothing to rescue our besieged country from its current mess that we find ourselves in. The Government should seriously consider that fact as it introduces a slew of new taxes on an already hard-pressed nation. Trying to defend the indefensible will do the Government no good. Madam Speaker, with those few words, I want to thank you for the opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I rise to support the Minister of Finance in his Order today, and I am very sad to hear my colleague and friend—I consider him a friend—from Mayaro. It is obvious that my colleague and friend from Mayaro did not research the entire gamut of anti-smoking measures, because he has focused his energies strictly on saying that this is a tax revenue generation measure, that we are not educating people and so on.

Let me turn my colleague's attention to a PAHO smoking cessation training workshop held on March 21st to 23rd in 2011. So, hon. Member, I will quote:

“Smoking Cessation Training Workshop for Public Health Care Service Managers on Strengthening...Systems for Treating Tobacco Dependence, in Port of Spain, Trinidad...”

And throughout all the RHAs, Madam Speaker, we have smoking cessation clinics directed to vulnerable populations, especially the school children. So they are there; if only my colleagues opposite will do the necessary research. It is just

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amazing. It is just amazing how the UNC simply comes here underprepared, undercooked and just make these statements. There are publicly funded smoking cessation clinics under all RHAs, and we have been working with PAHO since 2011 on this project. It is there on the Internet. It is there.

Madam Speaker, my colleague made a song and dance about the oncology centre. I have said clearly in two finance committee meetings that this administration took a decision to stop the oncology centre. Why? Under about four administrations, since 2007, 2007 to 20—when we stopped it, I believe we are now in 2020, in 2018, over a 10-year period the taxpayer of the country under a Patrick Manning administration, a Kamla Persad administration, for five years, for five years, when you had \$16 million budgets and buoyant oil and energy prices, the oncology centre could not be finished; could not be finished. The litigation that went into that is phenomenal from day one when the architect went into bankruptcy and there was a battle, a legal battle, over who owned the intellectual property for the drawings. Minister Stuart Young can speak to that. But three administrations could not finish it. We took a decision to cauterize that loss. From 2007, it is less than 50 per cent completed and it cost the taxpayer \$244 million which cannot be recovered. Starting with the Patrick Manning administration for about two years, five years under the Kamla Persad, the hon. Member for Siparia, five years, and we took a decision to cauterize this project. We built the Lanark in St. James, we are installing a new CT sim, and we have private sector involvement in PET-CTs. So all of this whilst it is not at the national oncology centre, it is there. So I hope my colleague is so informed.

Madam Speaker, my colleague went to town that this is a revenue generation measure. Let me tell you why I support this measure and how we could rebut that

argument. Trinidad and Tobago became a signatory to the WHO framework convention FCTC on August 22, 2003, that is 17 years ago, which was ratified and adopted by Trinidad and Tobago on August the 19th, 2004, 16 years ago, and entered into force on February 27, 2005, 15 years ago. Under that WHO sponsored measure we have signed on and ratified that we will implement both price and tax measures and non-price measures to decrease demand for tobacco, hon. Member. It is a combination, taxation and non-price measures. What are the non-price measures?—because you went to town on that

1. Advertising ban on cigarettes and tobacco implemented in Trinidad and Tobago. That is a non-price, non-tax measure. If only you would research;
2. A ban on advertising to children;
3. A ban on sponsorship for sporting and cultural events. That was done as a non-tax measure; and
4. No smoking indoors.

That is what Trinidad and Tobago did.

So it is a holistic approach, to use your word. You wanted a holistic approach; that is the holistic approach. Ban on advertising, ban on sponsorship, no indoor smoking, ban on sporting association, ban on steel band association, and now we are doing the other part, taxation. So that my friend from Mayaro, hon. MP, my good friend, that is the holistic approach, inclusive of smoking cessation clinics sponsored by PAHO.

So this policy position, Madam Speaker, is not solely policy—is not solely revenue generation. As a matter of fact, I am sure the Minister of Finance would like to collect no taxes from cigarettes, because it means no cigarettes are being

sold. That is what we would all like. But we have to increase—reduce the incidents of smoking. Why? Because as the hon. Minister of Finance said, it costs this country \$500,000 to treat a cancer patient. And this Order today to raise taxes by 20 per cent is part, is part of that Government's holistic NCD, non-communicable diseases plan. It is part of that plan. Why is it a part of that plan? Because we signed on to an IDB loan which has the strategic objective of reducing the incidence of premature deaths of NCDs by 25 per cent by 2025. And the reason why we are targeting lung cancer in this particular measure, hon. Member, if you would talk to your colleague from Fyzabad, he would tell you, most patients with lung cancer, most patients, appear before the doctor at stage three and stage four—correct?—when it is too late to treat so they die. So we have to do all the price measures and non-price measures.

So if we go to the Order, Madam Speaker, the Order talks about cigars and cheroots. My friend tried to explain what a cheroot is. It is simply a short thin cigar with both ends open as opposed to a normal cigar which has one end open. So we are increasing the taxes by 20 per cent. The old rate for cigars was \$30.16 per kg. That was not said in this debate. It now goes up to 36.19. The old taxation rate for cigarettes containing tobacco, Madam Speaker, was \$4.38, it now goes up to \$5.26, and the other was \$4.38, now goes up to \$5.26.

Madam Speaker, it talks about reform tobacco. I had to research what reform tobacco is. Reform tobacco is made from tobacco leaves but also what is called tobacco refuse and tobacco dust. Could you imagine that is what people are smoking? Could you imagine that? Which has proven to be carcinogenic, as my colleague from Fyzabad would tell you. But, Madam Speaker, the international evidence says, and this is from WHO, not the Government. And again, I was so

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disappointed by Mayaro who tried to mislead the public into thinking this is revenue generation. This is WHO policy which we have signed on to.

[Mr. Paray raises hand and stands]

WHO, increase in taxes is the most effective way using 2012, sorry. Sorry.

Mr. Paray: Madam Speaker, 48(6).

Madam Speaker: Hon. Member, please continue.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, *[Laughs]* Madam Speaker, WHO, I am just rebutting what my friend says that this is a revenue generation procedure. WHO says increase in taxes using 2012 data, if all countries increased the amount of excise they charge on cigarette packs by 50 per cent, it will lead to 49 million fewer smokers and 11 million fewer smoking related deaths. This is WHO talking about the policy of increasing taxes. This is not the PNM. This is not Minister Imbert. It is based on science. It is based on evidence. It is based on WHO policy. Simple as that.

Madam Speaker, Minister Imbert and both my colleague from Mayaro spoke about the ills of smoking. I want to take the population down a slightly different path. According to the American Lung Association, tobacco has about 600 ingredients, and when you burn it you get about 7,000 chemicals coming out of it. And this is why we have to discourage smoking by both the taxation methods and the non-taxation. Of those 7,000 chemicals, Madam Speaker, 69 are known to be carcinogenic, 69. Many are toxic. What are some of these toxic and carcinogenic chemicals? Nicotine, which we know about; tar, hydrogen cyanide, formaldehyde, lead, arsenic. Is this what we want to encourage people to put into their systems? But apparently the cigarette industry got to my Member, my friend from Mayaro. Apparently the cigarette industry got to him because he came here today to fight

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for them, which is your right.

Mr. R. Paray: Madam Speaker, 48(6).

Madam Speaker: Member, maybe you could retract that and say it in another way, please.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Sure. Sure. I retract. We also have radio elements, example, uranium; benzene; carbon monoxide.

Madam Speaker, the point is smoking is not good for you. So any measure, whether it is taxation or non-taxation, to reduce smoking, my colleagues opposite should welcome it, and not tar and feather it as a revenue generation exercise. It is not. Because as I said before, I will be glad, and I am sure the Minister of Finance will be glad if we collect no taxes from this, because it means no cigarettes are being sold, no cheroots are being sold, no cigarillos are being sold. That is the objective. It has nothing do with tax generation.

Madam Speaker, one of the reasons why I support this measure again has to do with the prevalence of smoking in Trinidad and Tobago, and this is what this measure is about. Increasing the taxes should hopefully make it more expensive, more out of reach, because the prevalence rates will frighten you. The prevalence rates according to our survey at the Ministry of Health taken in 2011, 33.5 per cent of males between the ages of 15 to 65 smoke. That is the prevalence rate as of 2011, and females is 9.4 per cent. But this is what is scary, Madam Speaker. The average age of initiation in both sexes is 17 years. That is the average age. So it means some children below 17 are initiated into smoking. And the average number of cigarettes being smoked today according to that survey in 2011 was 11.5 cigarettes, close to 12 cigarettes per day. That is dangerous, Member for Mayaro. That is dangerous.

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So, Madam Speaker, this is not a revenue generation mechanism. It is a mechanism to dampen the demand for cigarettes. I think I have dealt with my colleague who went to town on the national oncology centre. From 2007 it could not be finished. You had five years to finish it, it could not be done. And let me just address a last point that my colleague mentioned. He mentioned that WITCO was allowed to manufacture during the first lockdown. I am so glad that my colleague and his party was not in charge of the COVID response back then or even now, because there is something called the Constitution of Trinidad and Tobago. When we opened back manufacturing, we opened back manufacturing. We could not say open back manufacturing but close WITCO. You would have gotten a lawsuit, and the taxpayer of Trinidad and Tobago would have had to pay out a lot of money. Until and unless you make an industry illegal they have all rights, they have all rights to ply their trade, whether it is the manufacture of cement, whether it is the manufacture of steel and blocks and/or cigarettes. While we all condemn the use of cigarettes, while we will all like to see no cigarettes being sold during COVID, we had no choice to let manufacturing start back, regardless of whether it is cigarettes, cement, steel, blocks, soft drink, flour, food, biscuits, anything else.

So, Madam Speaker, I close in total support of this measure, and I say again, this is part of a holistic approach adopted by Trinidad and Tobago's adherence and membership of WHO and the policies ascribed by them for both taxation methods and non-taxation methods. Madam Speaker, I you thank. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Fyzabad.

[*Pause*]

Madam Speaker: Member, I recognized you already.

Dr. Lackram Bodoë (*Fyzabad*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, sometimes you do not hear in the booth. Thank you, Madam Speaker, for the opportunity to join in this debate here this afternoon on what I think is a very important subject, very important topic, something that is very close to my heart, of course, as a medical practitioner and as a Member of Parliament.

Madam Speaker, whilst this Legal Notice before us is short, it addresses an issue with devastating health and economic consequences, and I think therefore it is worthy of the examination we are seeing today in this House. Before I go on I just want to address two issues that the Minister of Health would have raised in his contribution, and that is the issue of the oncology centre, and I know the history of the oncology centre, and Minister I just want to take the time and the opportunity. We are talking about taxes, and my colleague for Mayaro raised the issue of where the taxes will go, and I just want to make a plug for some of the taxes from the tobacco collection to be put for the installation of a Lanark in the southern part of the country, Minister, because I know you have already installed one in St. James. And in the same vein, with regard to the collection of taxes, I want to make a plug for the start of the cardiac categorization laboratory in San Fernando hospital, a measure which I know you announced in the debate, and I am saying now that this is a way the taxes could be utilized.

But, Madam Speaker, we are dealing here with a very contentious issue, and it is really a battle in terms of the measures that would decrease smoking. I mean, we are all in agreement that smoking is a major problem. The Minister of Finance in his presentation mentioned statistics, the Minister of Health as well. If I may, Madam Speaker, according to the WHO estimates, five million people die annually from tobacco related disease. This translates on a daily basis to approximately

14,000 people dying daily across the world. If we were to look at the statistics for our own country here in Trinidad and Tobago, every year close to 1,000 of our citizens, the great majority of which are men, die from tobacco related diseases. In fact, the estimate is 990. If we were to break this down, it is even more frightening. This really translates to 15 men per week and five women per week dying from tobacco related statistics, very frightening statistics indeed. And of course we know that these deaths include deaths from cancer, heart disease, stroke and the other NCDs, the non-communicable diseases.

These statistics come from a publication called the *Tobacco Atlas*. It is a report on Trinidad and Tobago 2018, so it is very recent statistics. And this *Tobacco Atlas* is published annually by the American Cancer Society. I know the Minister of Finance quoted some figures from the American Cancer Society, but it is an annual publication that deals entirely with tobacco production, how do you deal with the issues relating to tobacco, and it is in partnership with an NGO called Vital Strategies. It is a very valuable resource, and I would want to commend that resource to those who are interested in this subject and those who are working in the area.

4.00 p.m.

So, Madam Speaker, in addition to these deaths, you have tobacco use is also associated with significant disease and disability as well, for example, stillbirths, mouth disease, vascular disease, blindness, impotence, and so on. Quite a bit. The other speakers raised the issue of the onset of smoking. So, we are trying as a tax measure, Madam Speaker— we are trying to use a tax measure as part of other measures to try and decrease the incidence and the prevalence of smoking, very important, and one of their strategies that can sometimes be used is to try and

find out when the problem started.

The Minister of Health indicated that 17 is the average age. This is from the Global Youth Tobacco Survey which was done in 2011 in Trinidad and it stated that there were:

“...more than 680 children”—and we are talking about on a daily basis—
“...more than 680 children”—between the ages of—“(10 - 14)...use tobacco...”—on a daily basis and over 145,000 of those age 15 and over use tobacco on a daily basis. Quite a big statistic.

What is even more worrisome, Madam Speaker, is that the same survey found that 40 per cent of all students between the ages of 13 to 15 in Trinidad have experimented with cigarette smoking at one time or the other. Very worrisome statistic. So you will agree that this is a troubling situation.

Another statistic which brings the scope of the problem home is the fact that a PAHO study in 2012 found that approximately 21 per cent of the population smoke cigarettes. I think the Minister of Finance quoted a figure of about 34 per cent with an average daily usage of 11.5 cigarettes. I am not a smoker, Madam Speaker, but I believe that a pack may contain 20 cigarettes. I stand corrected. So it means that the average smoker smokes at least half a pack a day.

So, there is also the issue which is addressed in this measure of what is called smokeless tobacco, that is tobacco that is burned, chewing tobacco leaves and so on, and it is quite a significant problem in Trinidad also. About 4,200 people have currently used this and I note that because this issue of chewing tobacco is associated with oral cancers, cancers in the mouth and the neck and their throat, and so on.

Madam Speaker, one of the issues which is also of concern to us here is the

huge economic cost that is associated with tobacco use in this country. Again, if I may quote from the American Cancer Society, the Tobacco Atlas that I indicated earlier. It indicates that the total direct and indirect cost of smoking in Trinidad and Tobago totals approximately TT \$1.85 billion annually. And this was also reflected in the World Bank report in 2018 which gave the same figure. And, of course, we also know that tobacco has been linked to 7 per cent of all the NCDs. It is a big problem in Trinidad and Tobago with 9 per cent of ischemic heart disease and 61 per cent of lung cancer in 2004. Yes, Member for Diego Martin North/East, smoking is a big factor in bladder cancer and, of course, other mobile lung cancers.

One other important statistic from that report is that in 2016 it was noted that the ischemic heart diseases, diabetes and cerebrovascular disease were the top three causes of premature deaths in Trinidad and Tobago with an annual economic burden of 8.7 billion. So it is quite a high economic cost in this country in terms of the diseases related to smoking.

Minister of Health, I know you would have mentioned at times that the WHO goal would be to get a 30 per cent relative reduction in smoking prevalence by 2025 and I trust that the Tobacco Control Unit at the Ministry of Health is working towards this, and I will come back to speak a little bit about the role of the Tobacco Control Unit and what it can play in terms of dealing with this overall problem.

So, Madam Speaker, it is just a very brief intervention I would want to make and I would want to say that this Motion before us today would be one that I trust would be another step in terms of our battle as a society to deter, to limit, to regulate and hopefully one day eliminate tobacco use amongst our citizens. I wanted to commend the action which has taken place across all administrations in

terms of fighting and dealing with this scourge of tobacco use in Trinidad and Tobago, and indeed across the world. And mention was made of the framework agreement that was signed at the World Health Assembly in 2003 and this was quickly translated into action in terms of a WHO Framework Conference for Tobacco Control, commonly called the FCTC. And, of course, we had the Tobacco Control Act in 2009 under one administration but in 2013, under a different administration, under the People's Partnership government, we had very important regulations called the tobacco regulations which would have given effect to some of the measures that was enacted in the Tobacco Control Act of 2009.

So, it has been a battle across—the battle continues across administrations, it is something that is important. And in my research, Madam Speaker, I came across a PAHO document which was examining the progress of countries in the region of the Americas with regard to the implementation of tobacco legislation and measures. And this is a statement that jumped out at me and permit me to quote, Madam Speaker, with regard to tobacco:

It—“...is the only legal...product that kills up to”—one—“half of those who use it...”—exactly—“as intended by the manufacturer”—and it causes illness and death in those non-smokers who are exposed to second-hand smoke.

Whilst we are speaking about cigarette smoke and the taxes and so on to decrease cigarette smoking, Madam Speaker, this issue of second-hand smoke is a very important issue and it is an issue that sometimes can be easily forgotten.

So I just want to say two things on second-hand smoke and I say this because it is a very important issue now in our current circumstances, because one of the issues that was raised with regard to second-hand smoke is that it carries the

same kind of morbidity and sometimes mortality as direct inhalation, direct smoking. In 2016, for example, it caused an estimated 884 deaths worldwide. So it is a very significant factor. And I make that point about second-hand smoke because if we were to review the legislation that is available in Trinidad, Madam Speaker, the Tobacco Control Act is quite comprehensive. It is good legislation supplemented by the regulations in 2013. A lot of it has not really been implemented and enforcement is part of the issue, Minister of Health, that is a big issue, you know that, the enforcement—but the law is there.

But in spite of all, for example, I mean, we have a ban on smoking in public spaces and whatnot and so on, but now the issue of second-hand smoke becomes a big issue. Because of the COVID-19— and one of the things that came about in one of the research studies is that children under-age and so on, learn to smoke in an environment where their parents and so on, are smoking. So now we have that issue where because of COVID-19 schools are closed and therefore you have children in the same environment as their parents and others who smoke, and therefore that is something that, you know, needs to be addressed. Because it has been stated that in many populations, homes are the main place of exposure to second-hand smoke for women and children.

Another issue with regard to smoking—and this issue again has come up in regard to the COVID-19 situation, Madam Speaker—is the issue of COVID deaths occurring in patients with comorbidities and of course smoking, as you know Minister, is one of the common comorbidities that is coming up in those statistics, and therefore it is even more important that we look at this issue of smoking with regard to that.

So, Madam Speaker, I just wanted to make a few suggestions. I wanted to

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ask a little bit, perhaps the Minister of Health again, to review the role of the Tobacco Control Unit which comes under his Ministry. Again, the legislation gives this Tobacco Control Unit tremendous powers and responsibilities, Madam Speaker, and if I may—I mean it is an important thing, I think, that we should point out. This Tobacco Control Unit which is created under the Act—the Tobacco Control Act—we speak about the holistic approach and this Tobacco Control Unit is tasked with, for example:

“(a) developing and implementing, in collaboration with civil society, a national strategic approach to tobacco control;”

So it means that it has the power to approach civil society, NGOs and so on, to try and work with them in conjunction, to look at measures, to:

“(b) undertaking impact assessment of national policies and programmes aimed at controlling consumption and production of cigarettes and other tobacco products;”

And, Madam Speaker, in my research, the most recent survey that I found with regard to cigarette smoking in Trinidad is 2011, Minister, and that speaks volumes to where we are in terms of research and how far we are behind. And therefore, I am calling upon the Minister to review what is happening with the Tobacco Control Unit at the Ministry. They have tremendous responsibilities and obviously they are not dealing with those in the manner that they are supposed to deal with. *[Interruption]* Sorry, I have just three minutes, Minister.

So, Madam Speaker, as I close, I just wanted to throw out a few suggestions that perhaps the Minister could look at addressing in addition to taxes, Minister of Finance. And one of the issues that has worked in many countries is the issue of mandatory health messages in films and, of course, the Government owns one of

the stations. But in some countries, for example, in India, if there is a movie being aired with smoking, it is mandatory to have a message on the screen saying that smoking is bad for your health when that scene is played, for example, somebody smoking. So that is one of the issues we can look at. There is also the issue of tobacco sales occurring close to schools, institutions and so on, we could look at, you know, whether it should not be so easily available. How do we deal with adults who smoke around children? I do not know the answer for that but that is something we need to look at. The Minister spoke about more cessation programmes and support measures, and there is also the issue of plain tobacco packaging. I know that there is another motion that speaks with health messages and I was hoping that we would be debating that today, but when that time comes, we will talk about it, but the issue of looking at plain tobacco packaging so it does not become attractive to young people. So that is the challenge that we are facing, Madam Speaker.

In the short time I have left, what are we up against? And I just want to quote here, in terms of the industry versus the measures we are taking. Now, the combined revenues of the world's six largest tobacco companies in 2016 was more than US \$346 billion. The industry is a powerful force, it does not fear the actions of nation states because of the extensive resources and global market powers. So we have this thing between the government and the key stakeholders, but it is constant battle, it is a battle that we have to win for the sake of society, for the sake of all of us, for the sake of our health. But just to give you an example, it is important that we strike a balance, Madam Speaker, how far do we go, because you want to regulate but you also have to use moral suasion, you have to count on personal responsibility and so on when you are treating with an issue like this. But

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I just want to close by quoting a study, a report on the 29th of August, 2020, *Al Jazeera*, and it says:

“Bhutan lifts tobacco ban amid coronavirus measures”

And it speaks to the issues that were raised here, and if you would allow me to quote from this article, Madam Speaker, as I close, very interesting:

“The Himalayan Kingdom of Bhutan, known for embracing gross national happiness and outlawing television until 1999, has now made the unusual decision to reverse a ban on the sale of tobacco, blaming the coronavirus pandemic.”

And I just say this for interest, it just shows how things can go. So, in 2010, this small country, 750 people, they:

“...had banned the sale, manufacture and distribution of tobacco in 2010 but allowed smokers to import”—small amounts—“controlled amounts...”

What has happened now with the COVID-19 is that those who were smuggling and bringing the cigarettes from across neighboring countries were no longer able to do that and of course it provided—it created a problem. So it:

“...prompted a rethink from the government of Prime Minister Lotay Tshering, a qualified doctor...”

And:

“His administration lifted the 10-year-old ban on tobacco sales to temper demand for smuggled cigarettes and, in theory, lessen the risk of cross-border contagion.”

So one can see, Madam Speaker, how one issue can translate into another but I just make reference to as to how far we can go and sometimes if we go too far, it can backfire on us. I thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. [*Desk thumping*] I wish to thank the Member of Parliament for Fyzabad for his contribution which was very supportive of what we are doing today—

Hon. Member: Mayaro.

Hon. C. Imbert: “Nah”, at all. And consistent with the work done by the predecessor of mine— when I was Minister of Health in 2001, my predecessor was Dr. Hamza Rafeeq of the UNC. And the work done by Dr. Rafeeq, I inherited it in 2001 and took it to the point of the framework on tobacco, and as I indicated earlier, Madam Speaker, this was then followed through by various Ministers of Health: Mr. Rahael, Mr. Narace, even Dr. Fuad Khan and now Mr. Deyalsingh. The consistent theme in all of this through various administrations and various Ministers of Health has been to do whatever is necessary to control, reduce and possibly eliminate the use of tobacco, tobacco products, cigarettes, and so on.

I have some advice for the Member for Mayaro. The tobacco industry is very, very clever, Madam Speaker, very, very clever. And I am just reading from a document here:

“Tobacco Explained...the truth about the tobacco industry...in its own words.”

And this was developed by the “London-based Action on Smoking and health”. And, Madam Speaker, if I could just do a summary:

“Thousands of internal tobacco industry documents released through litigation and whistleblowers reveal the most astonishing systematic corporate deceit of all time.”

In this document it initially dealt with:

“Smoking and health...the”—tobacco—“industry denied and continues to

deny that...that smoking causes lung cancer...”— although the industry has been aware of this since in 1950s.

And this document indicates:

“...that the industry’s stance on smoking and health is determined by lawyers and public relations concerns”—and not by doctors.

“Nicotine and addiction Until recently the industry has denied its product is addictive.”

Now it uses:

“...a definition of addictiveness...that encompasses shopping and the Internet.”

When you look at the warnings on tobacco packages, it is similar to shopping and the Internet. However, the industry:

“...has known since the 1960s that the crucial selling point of...product is the chemical dependence of its customers. Without nicotine addiction there would be no tobacco industry.

Marketing to children The companies deny that they target the young. The documents reveal the...”—opposite—“that the market of young smokers is of central importance to the industry. Many documents reveal the companies’ pre-occupation with teenagers and younger children - and the lengths they have gone to in order to influence smoking behaviour in this age group.”

“Advertising The industry maintains that advertising is used only to fight for brand share”—market share—“...research...”—indicates— “otherwise. The documents show that advertising is crucial in nurturing the motivation to smoke by creating or projecting the positive values...”

I will always remember an ad from way back, Madam Speaker, I do not know how old I was, but it was a long time ago. And it was an ad about du Maurier and an attractive young woman and an attractive young man meeting for dinner at a restaurant and the whole point of that advertisement was, look— look what comes out of smoking. This is what you get out of smoking. [*Crosstalk*] Everything is a joke for you, eh.

“Cigarette design The documents show that the companies...”—tried—“to make safer cigarettes”—at the beginning—“but then abandoned...”—that idea entirely because it was counterproductive, because it—“...would expose their...products as ‘unsafe’.”

“Second-hand smoke...” —the Member for Fyzabad spoke about that.

We are:

“...challenged by second-hand smoke in two ways. First...to protect non-smokers...reduce the opportunities to smoke...”

—and I am talking about the industry perspective. They worry about secondhand smoke because to protect non-smokers reduces the opportunity to smoke.

“Second, the ‘freedom to smoke’ arguments are confounded if non-smokers are harmed.”

So what the industry has been doing for the last several years, and this is why I would ask the Member for Mayaro to do some reflection, is that having been chased out of the west, they are now moving into developing countries and Eastern Europe. The industry described itself:

“...as the supplier of a legal product used for a widely-enjoyed social habit by adults who are fully aware of the risks and choose to take them to experience the pleasures”—of smoking.

But there is a much darker explanation about all of this:

“...it is a predatory industry whose market dynamics demand that it recruits young people.”

And I will explain that in a short while.

“It does this by deploying vast promotional expenditures to create, communicate and amplify a set of positive values...”

Believe it or not, what possible values could you have with cigarettes? But that is what advertising is all about. It promotes positive values.

“Once the glamour phase subsides, nicotine addiction takes over making the customer dependent on the product and securing a profitable cash flow”—that the industry requires.

What I found very interesting is another document and it has again actual quotes from documents revealed, exposed, discovered, from the tobacco industry. One of them a quote from a tobacco executive:

“We do not smoke that...”—poison— “We just sell it.”

And that shows you the level of contempt within the industry.

But more importantly, what I found very disturbing, big tobacco calls you and your friends “replacement smokers”. Because it replaces dying smokers with young smokers full of life. And therefore, Madam Speaker, this is why in this Parliament, and I am very proud to be part of that succession, and you might find it odd that I continue the work done by a UNC Minister of Health, Dr. Hamza Rafeeq, and I was happy to do that and to go to Geneva to deal with the framework on tobacco control. And since then, all Ministers of Health have recognized that cigarette smoking and tobacco products are downright dangerous. The arguments about how we should have therapy—nonsense, Madam Speaker. That is the kind

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mindset that comes when you buy into the fallacious arguments of big tobacco.

I am happy that the Member for Fyzabad has continued in the vein of health professionals in this Parliament. I thank my honourable colleague, the Member of St. Joseph for supporting this Motion and I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Provisional Collection of Taxes Order, 2020 be confirmed.

ADJOURNMENT

The Minister of Health (Hon. Terrence Deyalsingh): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday 20th October, at 1.30 p.m. At that time it is the Government's intention to debate the Anti-Gang (Amdt.) Bill, 2020. Thank you very much.

Madam Speaker: November?

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: Sorry, October, Madam Speaker.

Hon. Members: November.

Hon. T. Deyalsingh: November, correct, November. Madam Speaker, I beg to move that this House do now adjourn to Friday 20, November, at 1.30 p.m. At that time it is the Government's intention to debate the Anti-Gang (Amdt.) Bill, 2020. Thank you.

Salaries Relief Grant

(Government Accountability)

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, there are four matters that qualified to be raised on the Motion for the Adjournment of this House. I am advised by the Whip that we will be only proceeding today with Motion No. 4, the other three Motions shall be deferred. I therefore now call on the Member for Barataria/San Juan. [*Desk*

Adjournment (cont'd)

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thumping]

Mr. Saddam Hosein (*Barataria/San Juan*): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for recognizing me to raise this matter on the adjournment. And, Madam Speaker, I raise this matter on the adjournment today in order to discuss the failure of the Government to properly account for the distribution of the salary relief grants. And I raise this matter as a very important essential matter as there are many persons, thousands of persons who are today without the receipt of the moneys that was promised by this Government for the period April, March—March, April, June and July. The Government promised that they would have paid \$1,500 per month for persons who would have experienced a loss of income or a reduction in their income due to the pandemic and the lockdowns that were associated with them. And we know, Madam Speaker, as a matter of record, on the 13th of March was when the first lockdown was engaged by this Government, when there was a total lockdown and then there was the freeing up of the restrictions based on essential and non-essential workers.

And, Madam Speaker, when you look at what is happening, there are many questions to be raised with respect to the allocation, the distribution, the qualification and the eligibility of a person for the salary relief grant. Now, in the budget debate, earlier on, we would have recognized and we saw that the Minister of Finance, Minister Imbert, would have indicated and I quote from him, that 33,813 individuals lost their jobs and their incomes would have received the grant and they received 81,179 grants, amounting to \$129 million in salary relief or income support grants. But when you marry this, Madam Speaker, with the yellow books, the Recurrent Expenditure, you would have seen that the Government would have spent \$226 million on salary relief grant.

So, the Minister on one hand is telling us that they have spent \$129 million

Matter on the Adjournment (cont'd)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

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but when you look at the actual figures of expenditure in the yellow books, you are seeing \$226 million which means that there is \$97 million worth of salary relief grants that is not accounted for. The Minister can tell us today whether or not they are willing or it is the Government's policy to distribute that \$97 million that was recorded as a revised estimate of expenditure for fiscal year 2020.

Because when you look at the yellow books again, Madam Speaker, you would see that not a single cent, not a dollar was placed for fiscal 2021 for salary relief grants, not a dollar. And, Madam Speaker, there are many complaints of the length of time persons were taking to get this grant. Imagine, persons are unemployed since March of 2020, we are now in November 2020 and have not received this grant. The whole idea and the whole aim of this grant, the policy of it was to provide, what?—immediate relief, immediate relief. So persons have lost their jobs since then and they cannot get \$4,500, yet you see many other persons in this country are getting hundreds of thousands of dollars every month and you have people lined up in the hot sun and in the rain and they cannot just access \$4,500. You know what to do, Madam Speaker?—to buy groceries, to buy medicine, to buy food for their children and this Government is telling us that these persons continue to wait because of some processing issues.

4.30 p.m.

Now I am informed that there is some person who is working at this Department set up for the salary relief grant who is now subcontracted. The Minister can answer. So they are digitizing the records, sending it to an external source and the information is returning to the Ministry, but I do not know if the person is closely related or affiliated to this Government. So those are some of the things that the Government has to answer. Why is the processing of the grants

Matter on the Adjournment (cont'd)
Mr. Hosein (cont'd)

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taking so long, the salary relief grants? You must tell us where the \$97 million is being spent. So there are so many issues, Madam Speaker.

Now, what I want the Minister to also answer is the total—he must tell us what is the total amount of persons who applied for the grants. He must tell us how many applications were rejected; how many persons received more than one payment; and how many persons are still awaiting payments of grants. How many persons? And you know the Minister will come and tell us he does not know a breakdown of the grants by constituencies. Well, it is my information that the same Excel sheet that goes back to the department that deals with the salary relief grant in Tower C at the Waterfront—I believe it is the 10th floor—the Minister must now tell us what is the breakdown of the constituencies because we on the Opposition have a right to know that information, Madam Speaker. That is part of the accountability and transparency process of this Parliament. We have a right. And, Madam Speaker, the Excel sheet has a breakdown of the persons' names by address.

My colleagues on this side of the Bench, many of us experienced that when we go to our constituency offices there are many persons, hundreds of persons, that come and complain that they have not received their salary relief grant. Why is it taking so long? Why are persons not able to access this grant? Why are you allowing persons in this country to continue to suffer? And then I want to ask the Minister some other questions. I am informed that there are persons who qualify under the NIS programme and make contributions, but do not have bank accounts. What is the procedure, the process; or what is the policy with respect to the Government with those persons? Are they going to receive a physical cheque for the \$1,500, the \$3,000 or the \$4,500? So that is one of the other issues I wish to

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raise. Because, Madam Speaker, I have an article dated the 28th of September, 2020, from the *Newsday* and the article goes like this: they say families were broken up; employees were evicted; some are owing bank loans and they cannot pay; most of them signed up for the salary relief grant but did not get it as yet; one person said that she is a single parent with a mortgage to pay; and one other person said that “my daughter was even accepted into the University of the West Indies but we had to decline the offer because we do not have money to pay for tuition”. That is the level that this Government has reduced our citizens to in this country.

So I call upon the Government, I call upon the Minister to pay the citizens of this country what is due to them, give them their salary relief grant. [*Desk thumping*] We on this side will continue to fight for all of those persons who were affected by this pandemic, and I thank you very much, Madam Speaker, for this opportunity. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Minister of Finance.

The Minister of Finance (Hon. Colm Imbert): Thank you very much, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, some of the new Members opposite really have to improve. Today I was asked questions with respect to the salary relief grant and in one of those answers I gave the totals of the first tranche of grants, the second tranche of grants, the third tranche of grants, and persons who had received all three tranches in one payment. I gave the number of persons and the amount of money involved, yet the hon. Member for Barataria/San Juan, who obviously wrote to that contribution yesterday and did not bother to adjust it after I gave responses today, is demanding to know how many people got one payment, how many people got two payments, how many people got three payments. That was already asked and answered today, Madam Speaker, and I do hope that as this term

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continues that Members opposite will improve. Really, I am disappointed.

Let me deal now with the substantive matter. The matter is the “Failure of the Government to properly account for the distribution of the Salary Relief Grant”. By way of background, Madam Speaker, in April 2020 Cabinet approved the salary relief grant to provide relief for citizens, permanent residents who were registered within the national insurance system who are involuntarily terminated or suspended without pay as a result of the impact of COVID-19, also called Novel Coronavirus Disease 2019, in the form of a grant of \$1,500 per month for a period of up to three months. The eligibility period for the grant was March 12, 2020, and thereafter when Trinidad and Tobago recorded its first COVID-19 case. Initially, the close off was June the 30th, 2020. Our original estimate for payments of the grant was \$400 million.

We initially dealt with this because there was no budgetary allocation when we were faced with the COVID-19 pandemic in March. The budget had already been approved for fiscal 2020, so there was no allocation within the Ministry of Finance. So we vired funds, transferred funds from other Votes, and we initially paid out about \$70 million before the mid-year review. In the mid-year review we sought and obtained parliamentary approval to create a supplementary appropriation of \$400 million within the Ministry of Finance. This grant is administered by the National Insurance Board. It is separate and apart from the income support grant which was designed for self-employed persons and persons outside of the NIS system.

Over the period April to October 2020, the Ministry of Finance has disbursed to the National Insurance Board, because the way the system operates after the applications are processed, interrogated, checked, validated, the funds are

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sent to the National Insurance Board which makes payments to the beneficiaries. So far, the Ministry of Finance has disbursed to the National Insurance Board \$186.2 million. This has covered administrative expenses in the sum of \$4,165,296 and payments to a total of 33,970 persons, but totalling over 80,000 payments in the sum of \$131,735,563. Up to today, Madam Speaker—this is April to October, but as of today total payments are \$135,901,059.

The current balance of unused funds from the 186.2 million already disbursed to the National Insurance Board is \$50,298,940, and those funds will be used to pay persons who qualify for the grant. The total number of applications received, 69,346, and I indicated today as well—again the hon. Member was clearly not listening, I gave the number of applications which were not approved. So I do not know why the Member is demanding to know this when I already gave that information earlier today. As I said, he probably wrote his speech yesterday and did not change it. So that that information is already there in the public domain.

The number of applicants paid via ACH, which is the wire transfer system, 33,970; and those who do not have a bank account have been paid via a reloadable debit card, 8,221. The reloadable debit card was introduced to assist persons who had either invalid bank account numbers or just have no bank accounts at all. This is the methodology that we are using to deal with that category of persons. As I indicated earlier, just about 12,000 persons were deemed ineligible for a number of reasons: no NIS number, outside the dates of eligibility of the grant, they were not dismissed due to COVID-19, no proof of citizenship, no Identification Cards, no statutory declaration, and so on, and so on.

Madam Speaker, Cabinet approved the grant in April 2020, and by the 27th

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of April we began to disburse the grant. In fact, we did it within 14 days. Within 14 days we have disbursed over 81,000 grants [*Desk thumping*] and therefore, the statements made by the Member opposite are just ridiculous. I beg to move. [*Desk thumping*]

Divali Greetings

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, before I put the question on the adjournment of the House, I will now invite Members to extend greetings on the occasion of Divali which will be observed on Saturday, November 14, 2020. I now call upon the Minister of Communications. [*Desk thumping*]

The Minister of Communications and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister (Hon. Symon de Nobriga): Thank you, Madam Speaker. Madam Speaker, the festival of Divali which will be celebrated on Saturday the 14th of November is an especially sacred time for our Hindu community, and I have been given the distinct honour of bringing greetings on behalf of the Government. Madam Speaker, Divali symbolizes the spiritual victory of good over evil, knowledge over ignorance and light over darkness. The lights that will flicker on that night will stand as a beacon of hope to many. In this year as we celebrate Divali, amidst a global pandemic, it is our hope that the significance of this festival shows each of us that there are brighter days ahead.

As each deya is lit, the light that illuminates will act as a reminder that despite our circumstances darkness can be driven away. Divali has long brought us together despite religion or ethnicity as it embodies a deep sense of joy, respect and appreciation of our rich cultural diversity. So, Madam Speaker, let us continue this tradition even as we celebrate in our homes and in smaller gatherings. On behalf of us on this side, to the Hindu community in particular, and the national community

Divali Greetings (cont'd)

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Hon. Symon de Nobriga (cont'd)

in general, may the blessings of hope, of health, and of enlightenment be granted to us all. Shubh Divali. [*Desk thumping*]

Madam Speaker: Member for Princes Town.

Mr. Barry Padarath (*Princes Town*): Thank you, Madam Speaker, Madam Speaker, allow me to greet your good self and the national community in the Hindu traditional way of Sita Ram or Namaste. It brings me great pleasure to extend warm greetings to the Hindu community in particular, and the national community in general on the occasion of Divali 2020 on behalf of the Leader of the Opposition, the hon. Kamla Persad-Bissessar, and my colleagues on the Opposition Bench. Madam Speaker, this Divali is certainly amidst a time like no other, however, if at any time the message of Divali was relevant to the world and our nation, it is today. The light of Divali represents hope, progress, good health and a brighter future, while the darkness of negativity, sickness and despair surrounds us.

Our nation, like many others, has been inspired by some of the greatest civilizations of the world. Today, as we prepare to celebrate Divali we recognized the contribution of the Hindu community to the development of our nation alongside the other communities in our land. Divali 2020 has given us the opportunity to reignite community living, social integration and familial bonds. We as a society, like many others, have been jolted into the reality of what really matters. What matters are the values, traditions, religious teachings and principles that our ancestors brought from different parts of the world. Today, we are very happy to join with the Hindu community in upholding those teachings of our dharma as we observe Divali.

The leela or story of Lord Ram returning to Ayodhya after 14 years of exile is a constant reminder to us that hardship, suffering, pain and sadness can be

Diwali Greetings (cont'd)
Mr. Padarath (cont'd)

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prolonged, but there is always an end date to that. Madam Speaker, during this period there is a bhajan, a Hindu hymn, that is often sung and the words of that hymn suggest and I will translate it after, but it says:

“mukh mod chale aaj hamare ram ayodhya chhod chale”

And this bhajan was sung when Lord Ram was exiled for 14 years, and during Diwali we are often told of the leela of Lord Ram who triumphant over the evil Ravana. When Lord Ram was sent into exile for 14 years, the people of Ayodhya followed him out of the city. They cried in anguish, they experienced severe difficulties. It was a city that found itself in despair. However, despite the many years of hardship and suffering, peace, happiness, love and celebrity returned when the 14 years of exile came to an end.

This leela of Lord Ram has taught us that sometimes the duration of the pain might be long and it may seem never-ending, however, you always live in hope, you always fight for what is right and you always uphold your dharma. In local parlance we often say “time is longer than twine”. Therefore, I ask our nation’s citizens to use the message of Diwali to help them in coping during these difficult times. It is in these difficult times that our faith keeps us strong. This Diwali, therefore, is a time for us to undertake the deep introspection, deep thought and meditation of the true essence of our lives because we have seen how unexpectedly the very world we live in can change.

Madam Speaker, just a few days ago the world witnessed the ascension of the first female Vice-President of the United States of America, and a literal translation of her name, Kamala Devi, is a representation of the Goddess Lakshmi, and it helped to remind me of the Member for Siparia whose name Kamla also is a translation of the Goddess Lakshmi who is celebrated during Diwali time.

Divali Greetings (cont'd)
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Madam Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to also thank and pay tribute to organizations such as Maha Sabha, NCIC, and others who have laid the foundation for us here as Hindus in Trinidad and Tobago. It was a few years ago that I stood in this Parliament and I paid tribute to the Maha Sabha for the contribution they have made towards education. Madam Speaker, at that time they had completed their hat-trick through the Lakshmi Girls' Hindu College. This year, Madam Speaker, Lakshmi Girls' Hindu College for the fifth year in a row has won the President's Medal. On the passing of Shri Satnarayan Maharaj, the former head of the Maha Sabha, I would like on behalf of the Opposition to pay public tribute to his value that he has placed on education.

We in the Opposition, Madam Speaker, wish our nation a very happy and safe Divali. We are reminded that the Goddess Lakshmi who is prayed to during this Divali time is also the Goddess of good health. So while Maha Lakshmi represents many significant things in this period of this pandemic, Madam Speaker, we pray for good health throughout the world. Madam Speaker, I was reminded as I came into the Parliament today I saw in the Rotunda that there is a display and it was during the Panday administration that in this Parliament the first deya was lit, and I am very happy to congratulate the Parliament for the inclusivity in terms of the celebrations here in the Parliament of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago.

Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to have brought greetings on behalf of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia—

Madam Speaker: Members, can we just respect the greetings.

Mr. B. Padarath: Madam Speaker, I thank you for the opportunity to have brought greetings from the Leader of the Opposition, the Member for Siparia, and my Opposition colleagues as we wish our nation Shubh Divali 2020. I thank you.

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[Desk thumping]

Madam Speaker: Hon. Members, it is with a deep sense of reverence that I extend to you and to the national community greetings as we celebrate Divali, the festival of lights. As we all know, Divali symbolizes the triumph of good over evil. Customarily, Divali brings communities together as resources are pooled to produce luminescent displays of deyas, creatively balanced on intricate bamboo constructs. The lighted deya being the symbolic representation of the triumph of light over darkness.

Divali is also traditionally a time when family and friends gather to celebrate the vibrancy of life and to look forward to the coming year with optimism and a renewed sense of purpose. References to the tenet that light shall prevail over darkness demands of us not mere lip service, but requires demonstration by action. As this year more than any other year in recent human civilization, we have faced and continue to do so, unprecedented times being beseeched by the global COVID-19 pandemic, it is ensuing economic and social challenges and it is deconstruct of cultural norms.

Admittedly, this year has posed many a difficulty, however, the celebration of Divali should elicit hope within us as individual and among us as a nation, Divali should inspire us to exhibit resilience and patience. Divali should help us to find peace and a reassuring comfort during this period of darkness. As we light our deyas this year, I encourage each of us to hold steadfastly to the belief, and in our actions and our deeds demonstrate that belief that light will always triumph.

On behalf of the Clerk of the House, the staff of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago and on my own behalf, may I wish the Hindu community Shubh Divali. May the light of hope, peace and love illuminate the hearts and spirit of the

Diwali Greetings (cont'd)
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people of Trinidad and Tobago.

Question put and agreed.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 4.52 p.m.