



Statement by
Senator, The Honourable Donna Cox
Minister of Social Development and Family Services
on

THE MASK BILL DEBATE

August 29, 2020

Thank you very much, Madam President. Permit me to congratulate you on your reappointment to the position of President in this august Chamber. In my brief tenure during the last parliamentary session, I was awed by your demeanour, your temperament and the professional manner in which you conducted business and I just want to commend you for it. I just want to say welcome to the new Members of the Senate and I would not say old Members but those who were here before, I would like to welcome you also.

And so, Madam President, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to enter the debate on this Public Health (Amdt.) Bill, 2020, which sets the framework to bring into law the necessity of wearing masks in public. Madam President, as legislators, there are pieces of legislation that we are eager to see come to the floor of this Chamber, especially legislation that would significantly alter and enhance the quality of life for our citizens.

Madam President, we should never have had to come to this Chamber to enact into law or anything dealing with the wearing of mask. I just want to agree with Sen. Anthony Vieira who also stated this. But in my relatively short sojourn here on this earth, I have learnt a few things and they are: You cannot legislate “broughtupsy” or good behaviour and that is a personal choice, and second, as we say in local parlance “who doh hear will feel”, “Peter pays for Paul and Paul

pays for all”, and the fourth is, “it is better to be safe than to be sorry”. So these local sayings echoed constantly through my ears when I realized that we had reached a point of inevitability in the fight against this invisible, odourless, colourless virus.

And this is personal to me because I remember at the close of every press conference that at some point from since March, it was daily, together with the Minister of Health and the public health officials, I would exhort the population to sanitize, wash your hands, practice social distancing methods and of course wear a mask.

But I would like to respond to Sen. Jearlean John who made comments about the education of the people. I would like to say that one of the areas that the Government has always been commended about during this pandemic was the communication efforts made by the public health officials, by the Ministry of Health, by the Ministry of Communication. You know, I think in every area. Even the Ministry of Health went into rural areas with a PA system to educate the public about this virus. Social media, websites, there was even a dedicated website for Spanish-speaking persons so that they can go up and understand what is happening. There were many advertorials on radio, on television. And I must say that I do not know where the Senator was but in Trinidad and Tobago, at the time even when there was a lockdown, there was nothing else to do but to listen to the radio, look at television and hearing what is going on and being told every day to wear a mask, you know, and I felt it was not correct to say that the public

was not educated enough on the virus and wearing a mask. It is even actually now on the television, on radio, there are some advertisements on the proper wearing of masks, and which it has been running during prime time and I saw one up to this morning.

This pandemic has a crippling effect on all countries throughout the world and the number of persons who have died because of the virus is approximately 836,475 persons and there are over 24 million cases of COVID-19 in the world today. So this can tell you how serious this is. In Trinidad and Tobago, we have had a total of 894 active cases and 1,577 samples have tested positive at public and private facilities in Trinidad and Tobago and this is at the figures this morning. So some citizens scoff at wearing masks, others question the Government's authority to enforce this very directive that will help to preserve the life of the people of Trinidad and Tobago, where our watchwords are "Discipline, Production and Tolerance".

This particular issue, Madam President, is one that we all agree needs complete support in order for us to contain the spread of the virus and some may view this Bill as a heavy-handed approach to the citizenry which Sen. Jayanti Lutchmedial stated. But the reality is that the moderate approach employed before of moral suasion and persuasion is one that we realized that the population has not been listening. So at this point in time, we now have to rely on compulsion as our last resort and this Bill will assist us.

As a Government, Madam President, giving priority to the safety and welfare of our citizenry is of utmost importance. In an attempt to slow down the spread of this virus, an increasing number of countries have made wearing face masks mandatory with citizens facing a possible fine if caught without one. So this is nothing new and there are more than 100 countries that require persons to wear face masks and some of them, include, you know, Australia, Poland, France, Spain, Italy, England and even nearby Venezuela.

Madam President, for me, it was not a case of do as I say but not as I do because my mom lives with me and even if I was careless or irresponsible with my own health, then I would have been putting her life in danger. It is not easy to wear a mask all the time even having to deal with your mom at home. I have not been able to hug or kiss my mom since March, since this has come out, COVID-19 and that is not an easy situation. I am not even sure if she understands why I cannot hug her or kiss her so it has not been easy, but I have to be responsible, I may just be saving her life.

Day after day, press conference after press conference, the country's top medical health officials begged and pleaded and encouraged, recommending an advice to the population about the efficacy of wearing masks as part of the arsenal against this relentless virus. So on many occasions, these public servants were the brunt of adverse comments and unfair criticisms from persons who should know better and I would sit there and feel their pain for the thankless job they are performing.

So, Madam President, for those in our society who suggest that people being cautious are cowards, for people who refuse to take even the simplest of precautions to protect themselves and those around them, I want to ask in all sincerity, you know, how dare you. How dare you risk the lives of others? How dare you decide for others that they should welcome exposure as getting over with? When literally no one knows who will be the lucky mild symptoms case and who may fall ill and die. Because while we know that some people are more susceptible, suffering a more severe case, we also know that there are 20- and 30-year-olds who are dying. There are babies who are dying. There are fit persons, people who marathon runners, who are health freaks who are dying also. And how dare you behave as though you know more than the medical experts when these experts have acknowledged that there is so much that they do not know? But what we do know, we should be smart enough to be concerned about how easily this virus could spread. So the more we act to save our risk of exposure, the better off we all are. We might just reduce unnecessary suffering and death and buy time for the scientific community to study the virus in order to come to a fuller understanding of the breadth of its impact in both the short and in the long term.

But, Madam President, this Bill being debated today seeks to amend the Public Health Ordinance, Ch. 14 No. 4, to introduce a fixed penalty system for offences committed under section 105 of the Public Health Ordinance and this allows mask wearing to be a fixed penalty offence and people who are in breach of the same

will have the opportunity to pay a fine or get a ticket of course. The Government notes that while a vast majority of persons are complying with the issues, the guidance being issued by the public health officials, there are some who are reckless and thereby they are endangering the lives of others. By introducing this fixed penalty offence, the Government can now make other breaches of the Public Health Ordinance a ticketed offence instead of an arrestable offence and failure to wear a mask is one area where this fixed penalty can be applied.

Additionally, clause 3 of the Bill would amend section 105 of the Public Health Ordinance to increase the maximum penalty for breaches of regulations from 50,000 to 250,000 and which is to make it clear that—I think you know because someone messaged me and was talking about it, “it is so draconian and 250,000” because that is all they were seeing, but what has to be clear is that that is the maximum penalty, \$250,000 and the population needs to know that. And this Bill, of course, there is also an appeal process whereby persons charged with the offence can appeal his or her matter to the magistrate in the district in which the person paid the fixed penalty.

But there is a simple way to avoid falling victim to these penalties of course and that is just to wear a mask. And today, I want to encourage all business owners and people with small parlours and so on, to, of course, continue to deny entry of persons who do not want to wear a mask. Some of them, I have seen people arguing at business places at the entrances because they do not have a mask and

they are not being allowed entry. I think that this should continue because the pursuit of profit should never trump the protection of patrons.

In an ideal world, my health should not be dependent upon the intelligence of others but we do not live in an ideal world and sometimes it becomes necessary for the Government to protect us from ourselves and there can be no doubt, Madam President, that the simple act of wearing a mask can mitigate against the spread of the virus and I am truly heartened to see the masking industry this has spawned proving yet again the resilience of our fellow Trinbagonians and Sen. Dillon-Remy spoke about the mask industry being spawned because of this.

There are some things I want to go back to. Sen. John spoke about the mask and I would like to say that the Ministry of Finance through Nipdec in July distributed about 436,400 masks free of charge to the population and I know that they were supposed to be delivering 450,000 more. Now, I am not sure if that was given out as yet, might be but I know that by the 23rd of July, 436,400 masks were given out to the population. And yes, there are many persons, you know, with the community spirit, have been making masks, giving out masks, decorating masks, doing a lot of stuff. It has been a big industry. A lot of persons have been making money off of mask wearing. So the Government has provided masks for the population and employment for persons making masks.

Madam President, in the same way that I refuse to put the keys to my happiness in someone else's pocket, I must also take responsibility for my health and well-being. In these circumstances, it must mean cultivating the habit of wearing of a mask whenever I am in contact with anyone else. It is the acceptance and in the discipline of that personal responsibility by every citizen that will lead to national transformation.

What I have found is that everything, you know, people talk about, you know, the Government and the Government, but what about our personal responsibility? Each of us has a personal responsibility, not only to save our lives but to save the lives of the persons who we come in contact with. And we do not change the world by trying to change everyone else, we change the world by taking personal responsibility for our thoughts, our words and our actions. Change is contagious and it begins with each one of us accepting personal responsibility for the outcomes that we desire.

And today, I join with my colleagues on this side and indeed with this honourable Senate in urging my fellow Trinbagonians simply, get in the habit of wearing a mask and the truth is, just as we flattened the curve before, we could do it again. Just as we have weathered many storms before, we can do it at this time.

And, Madam President, as I conclude, permit me to remind the citizens of this beloved country that we are all in this together and we have to fight it together. I mean, the virus is no respecter of persons regardless of race or creed or political

affiliation or anything like that, so we need to now get together, come together and fight this virus together. We must share the burden of this new normal, even in the way we now live in this fight to keep this dreaded virus away. It is either we mask it as they say or prepare for a casket.

I thank you, Madam President.