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**MINISTER OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT &
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DEBATE ON MOTION OF CENSURE
BROUGHT BY
SENATOR THE HONOURABLE ANTHONY VIEIRA
**CONDEMNING BEHAVIOUR OF OPPOSITION
SENATORS AT ELECTORAL COLLEGE
ON OCTOBER 21, 2021**

FEBRUARY 22, 2022

Edmund Burke once said, *“The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.”* And I, Madam President, refuse to sit silently and do nothing against this evil that is threatening to entrench itself within our upstanding Parliament. Hence, the reason I am making this contribution today on this important motion.

Madam President, I thank you for the opportunity to join in this debate. Despite Mr Burke’s wise words, I must confess that I was a bit hesitant about contributing today, for the sole reason that I did not wish to give any more oxygen to the blatant disrespect and callous disregard for authority that were displayed on that fateful day in October. Indeed, I wish to blot that shocking episode from my mind.

But Madam President, as I listened to the desperate and feeble attempts of the Opposition team justifying this disgraceful conduct, led of course by Senator Mark, a gentleman with the distinction of having presided over both Houses of Parliament, and Senator Roberts whom I know is much brighter than he sounds and appears to be, I knew that I could not sit here and say nothing. After all, facts do not cease to exist just because they are ignored and you cannot take back the spoken word once it has been uttered.

No matter how hard you try, you cannot walk it back. And the fact is that the Opposition Senators from this Chamber launched a reprehensible attack on their Independent colleagues and sought to cast aspersions on their integrity and ability to perform their function in an impartial manner. Furthermore, they sought to lead what was tantamount to an insurrection against the Presiding Officer, perhaps drawing inspiration from Russia's October Uprising of 1917.

However, their attempts in that sitting on November 23, 2021 to distance themselves Madam President, was like a scene from a bad horror movie where we all watched in stunned silence; appalled, shocked, disturbed and horrified. We have witnessed such display before but never to this extent.

October 21, 2021 will go down as one of the darkest days in the history of this Parliament, and therefore from the onset, I condemn in the strongest manner, the uncouth, and yet carefully calculated disrespect meted out by Opposition Senators to their colleagues and the Presiding Officer, whether through the overt actions of some, the silent complicity of others, or the utterances of those who chose to skirt around the issue, pretending that it was just another day in Parliament.

Madam President, what are we to make of this? What should be our response as a legislative body, presiding over the laws of this country? Shall we turn a blind eye and pretend it did not happen or should we push back and say that “this is not good enough for us...we are much, much better than this!”

Senator Vieira’s Motion which seeks on the one hand and I quote, *“to censure the unparliamentary conduct of said Opposition Senators who have attempted to obstruct, impede, influence or interfere with said Independent Senators in the performance of their duties”* and on the other hand, offer a remedy by means of the creation of “a code of ethical conduct and behaviour for Senators,” is as welcomed as it is necessary.

What I have recognised is, as the words of our former President ANR Robinson stated in his address to the Nation on 5th January, 2005 is that *‘bad habits are gathered at slow degrees, as streams running into rivers and rivers into seas’*. *So things happen day by day, you accept them and then they keep creeping on, until you are overwhelmed, you cannot do anything more about them.*” Madam President, Senator Vieira is not willing to take that chance and I believe this is why he has taken the action that has brought us here today.

For too long, Madam President, and despite your many pleadings, Opposition Members of this Senate have demonstrated scant courtesy to the long accepted rules of this Honourable House, seeking instead to create and abide by their own rules.

From the belligerence of Senator Lyder, the bellowing of Senator Roberts and Senator Nakhid, to the blatant misbehaviour of the rest, they have collectively cheapened the value of the Opposition bench, and the quality of representation demanded of those of us who occupy these seats of privilege. It is a pattern of behaviour that sacrifices the trust of the electorate and the sanctity of this Parliament in favour of cheap tricks and meaningless, attention-grabbing antics.

Madam President, the motion declares, *“all Senators have a duty to uphold the dignity, discipline and decorum of Parliament and defend it against disrespect,”* and from the smallest child to the eldest citizen, no one can deny that the behaviour of Members Opposite at the Electoral College on October 21, 2021 was far from dignified; it lacked both discipline and decorum, and was downright disrespectful.

What is harder to swallow is that it appeared to be a carefully calculated, premeditated, rehearsed and vicious attack, which was carried out in the full glare of the public, without a care in the world about the impact of such behaviour on those who may be watching: the elderly, persons with disabilities, children, our nationals in the diaspora and the wider international community.

Their failure *“to uphold the dignity of Parliament, by disregarding its rules, by using unparliamentary language, by disobeying and ignoring the authority of the Presiding Officer,”* not only served their narrow political interest, but even more unfortunately, diminished and eroded confidence in our public institutions. As painful as it was to see it unfold, Madam President, it was unsurprising, because it is straight out of the UNC’s playbook – that which they cannot control, they seek to destroy.

Madam President, it is a paradox of our modern democracy that we have the conditions and tools to enable our political system to work better than ever before, yet, we are forced to spend hours discussing its dysfunction.

The reality is that what should facilitate a smooth-running, engaged political system, has instead helped corrode it. The leeway and latitude afforded Parliamentarians by means of their freedom to speak in this House were abused in the most despicable manner. In politics, Madam President, as in other aspects of life, abundance can be good but excess is often harmful.

Madam President, their strategy is as clear as day, but rooted in darkness.

Since August 11, 2020 we have been subjected to a continuous onslaught, whereby Parliamentary sittings were sometimes converted into another election campaign event or Monday Night Forum. But Madam President, Ecclesiastes 3:1 says “*there is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens*”, and this type of behaviour speaks to a complete disregard for when the season of campaigning ends and governing begins. It is harmful for decision-making and speaks to a lack of understanding as to the difference between campaigning and governing, and I can tell you Madam President, it is exhausting to all of us and the public, and further erodes the trust they have in politicians.

This permanent campaigning only encourages “short-termism”, and places the focus solely on an opportunistic grab for media headlines. Sadly, this approach only fans the politics of negativity and makes for an *us-against-them culture* in this country. And I wish to reiterate, it stretches the patience and erodes the trust of voters.

This permanent campaigning, Madam President, is aided and abetted by the modern 24-hour news cycle which both enables and encourages it, by providing platform and spur. The ability to always command attention, when there is so much airtime available, permits persons to transform themselves into *wanna-be* political superstars and make a spectacle of themselves, flying high but lacking in substance. (Is this the kind of reputation you wish to be remembered by and have recorded in the annals of our Parliament?)

Such behaviours come at the expense of eroding the public’s trust and confidence in the political system, which makes governing more difficult. It is a huge contributing factor to declining voter turnouts and also causes persons with abilities that are needed by our country to stay away from public life. Which citizen in his/her right mind, would willingly step forward and be subjected to the kind of character assassination experienced by some of our Independent Senators?

Which citizen, would want to have their name dragged through the proverbial mud? Madam President, if the citizens cannot trust their Parliamentarians to set the example and behave with civility and respect for each other, from whom else can it be expected?

On that fateful day in October the Opposition Members of this Senate behaved terribly and — thanks especially to the all-pervasive media and that decision taken, all those years ago, to allow the televising of Parliament — ordinary citizens saw and heard this, and they disliked what they saw.

In a March 2018 contribution to a public policy journal (John Menadue), Australia's former chief scientist Ian Chubb put his finger on the problem when he said:

"I can see on television the people we employ to work in our interests behave in a way we would not tolerate in our own small children. Sadly, at a time when trust is so low, contempt so high, it appears they don't even try to get better. They seem not to understand that trust is what we give them when they earn it, not what they get because they are where they happen to be."

In 1978, our own storytelling Calypsonian Explainer described the behaviour of Parliamentarians of his time in the song, *"In Parliament They Kicksin."*

Fast-forward to this present time, it appears that, rather than improving, the behaviours of some Parliamentarians have instead deteriorated to an unacceptable level.

Madam President, it is a source of constant bewilderment to me that some Opposition Senators are aware that they are infuriating the public by often conducting themselves, in Parliament, like out-of-control adolescents, but yet they fail to curb this conduct. Sadly, they are only present in this Chamber because this is the best the UNC has to offer.

Madam President, maybe it was the adrenaline of the chamber. Maybe it was an opportunity to perform for their leader and the public. Perhaps it was because they knew the entire country was focused on this event. Perhaps it was the pursuit of the parliamentary point.

But whatever drove them to behave in a manner that would be unacceptable in almost any workplace, is costly both to them and to the political process — and could be easily changed by a bit of collective restraint. Of course, Parliament will always have its moments, but chaos and insult-throwing should not be the norm. It is unacceptable, and should be swiftly and soundly condemned by all right-thinking citizens.

Addressing the United Nations General Assembly in September 2018, UN Secretary-General António Guterres warned that the world is *“suffering from a bad case of trust deficit disorder”*.

According to him:

“Trust is at a breaking point. Trust in national institutions. Trust among states. Trust in the rules-based global order. Within countries, people are losing faith in political establishments, polarization is on the rise and populism is on the march.”

I dare say, Madam President, that the major task of restoring political trust is inextricably linked to the tasks of critically reflecting on our own behaviour as leaders in our communities and country, and then working towards significant reforms to social and economic policies. And it is against this background that Senator Vieira’s call for the establishment of a Select Committee to consider “a code of ethical conduct and behaviour for Senators,” could be the light to penetrate this darkness.

A Code of Conduct is really a written agreement between parties laying out acceptable behaviour in specific situations, therefore, what is being proposed is no earthshattering proposition. Many companies have them, Trade Associations have them, Girl Guides Have them, Scouts have them, who are we Madam President? Why can’t we in this Honourable House have one also!

A 2012 “Background Study on Professional and Ethical Standards for Parliamentarians” from the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights ([98924.pdf \(osce.org\)](#)) stated the following: “The regulation of parliamentary behaviour and ethics standards is an essential element to secure public trust in the efficacy, transparency and equity of democratic systems, as well as to foster a culture of public service that favours public interest over private gains.

Various regulatory models exist to control the conduct of parliamentarians with a visible trend towards developing “Codes of Conduct” of acceptable standards of parliamentary behaviour and ethics. Indeed, recurrent scandals and controversies in parliamentary democracies suggest that reform of ethics regulations, carried out in an inclusive, transparent and consultative manner, could be an important element in restoring trust in democratic systems of governance.”

Admittedly though, many Parliaments have not developed codes of conduct or ethics, preferring to rely on professional standards that exist in the “web” of laws, including their own rules of procedure and standing orders.

Indeed, Madam President, we in this Parliament rely on our Standing Orders to regulate our affairs; we also have a Privileges Committee clothed with the authority to impose sanctions of different sorts on errant Parliamentarians. We have relied exclusively on the decency and, to use the distinctively Trinbagonian word, “*broughtupsy*” of our Parliamentarians, to conduct ourselves in a manner that would lend itself to order.

And indeed, as my colleague, Senator Rambharat indicated in his contribution, by virtue of our oath of Office, we have a solemn duty to uphold the dignity of this Parliament, a duty that transcends the narrow, parochial interests we believe we are called to defend. And that’s what this debate is about – duty to country and fidelity to our oath. But Madam President, the broad brush of odium, ridicule and contempt that has been used to paint all Parliamentarians, not just the errant and tantrum-throwing Opposition Senators, must give us reason to pause, as this motion is asking.

The authors of the background study referenced earlier, noted that “the introduction of codes of conduct is a growing trend that takes into account new dynamics such as higher public expectations for public representatives, as well as politicians’ demand for increased guidance and advice in their ethical decision-making.”

Madam President, a 2013 report produced by Transparency International entitled “The Effectiveness of Codes of Conduct for Parliamentarians”

https://www.transparency.org/files/content/corruptionqas/The_Effectiveness_of_Codes_of_conduct_for_Parliamentarians.pdf opined that:

“the overall purpose of codes of conduct for parliamentarians varies across countries. However, they typically set objectives such as:

- *provision of a set of ethical standards for parliamentarians*
- *promotion of ethical behaviour and discouragement/avoidance of unethical behaviour*
- *provision of guidance when a parliamentarian is faced with difficult decisions*
- *establishment of values and responsibilities*
- *provision of defence against unfounded accusations*
- *increase/restore citizens’ trust in the institution*
- *increase accountability, and*
- *statement of professional conduct.”*

The report went a step further and added:

“The effectiveness of the code of conduct for parliamentarians may depend on a range of factors, including a process of consultation and discussion prior to the enactment of the code, the existence of an active civil society, free media, a functioning integrity system, an effective protection mechanism for whistle-blowers, and parliamentarians’ commitment.”

Madam President, I respectfully submit that based on this list of ingredients, this Parliament is just about ready to engage in the discussions envisaged in Senator Vieira’s call for the establishment of a Select Committee *“to consider and report on a code of ethical conduct and behaviour for Senators.”*

We are all familiar with the scripture Luke 12:48 that says: *“to whom much is given, much is expected.”* With some poetic licence, I wish to submit a new reading that says, *“to whom much is given, much will be demanded.”* As Senators, we have been selected and entrusted with the great responsibility of representing the interests of our society. Such responsibility demands that our decorum would be reflective of the gravity of the position we hold and be a model for those looking on, particularly our children. However, the uncivil and dishonourable conduct of the Opposition Senators on that day represented a dereliction of duty.

Madam President, as adults we cannot condemn the unruly behaviours and bullying activities of our young people whilst simultaneously excusing our own behaviour by disguising it as our right to freedom of expression.

Truly, we are privileged to have the right and ability to share our unfiltered voices during our contributions, yet the constant interruptions, name-calling and complete reckless behaviour of the Opposition Senators on that October day set a new, unacceptably low precedent when addressing matters in the Parliament. Is this how we want to represent ourselves and our country to the impressionable youth of this nation? Is this the kind of standard we want to set for young generations to emulate? Those opposite have a tendency to view politics as a competition; they oppose for opposing sake, rather than seek the interest of the people of Trinidad and Tobago.

They behave like petulant children who hurl insults as they snatch up their marbles and leave when the game does not go their way. This immature, infantile political behaviour is negatively affecting the morals and mind-sets that young people are being raised with.

Madam President, if this conduct took place in any one of our secondary schools it would mean at least a trip to the Principal's office for the perpetrators, suspension and a possible expulsion if this was not a first offence. In other words, some kind of reprimand would be prescribed.

Madam President, this type of behaviour displayed in this Honourable House should not be tolerated.

As Parliamentarians, we cannot simply sit down in silence, drink water and mind our business, because the attacks were primarily against the Independent Senators and the Presiding Officer. If we fail to speak out now, we may find ourselves in a similar predicament as the narrator in the poem "*First they came...*" by the German Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller.

Indeed, Madam President, the behaviour meted out to the Presiding Officer by the Opposition Senators should concern even you, for as the saying goes "Today for me, Tomorrow for you". However, even if we attempted to keep quiet on this matter, the walls of this Chamber and the stones surrounding this Parliament will cry out for something to be done, because we just cannot go on this way.

As I close, I wish to echo the sentiments of Senator Deyalsingh who called on the Opposition Senators to offer an apology to the Independent Senators for the disrespect meted out to them. They did not only disrespect them Madam President, they disrespected all of us. We did not deserve that treatment. Nothing we have done justified that type of public ridicule and humiliation. If the Members on the other side apologise, this could signal the beginning of the rapprochement needed to begin the healing process for the trauma our nation suffered on October 21, 2021.

We are not perfect individuals, so I humbly suggest we all look within ourselves; we can all do better.

Let us do what the King of Pop Music, Michael Jackson said in his popular song 'Man in the Mirror' – *"If you want to make the world a better place, take a look at yourself and make a change."*

Madam President, I thank you.

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