



*Senator the Honourable Donna Cox*  
**Minister of Social Development and Family Services**

***BE IT RESOLVED that this House adopt the Report  
of the Joint Select Committee on the  
Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government  
Reform) Bill, 2020***

**June 07, 2022**

Mr. Vice President, I am grateful for the opportunity to contribute to the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill 2020, and offer my sincerest congratulations to all those who have worked so diligently to get us to this most momentous occasion in the history of Local Government reform in Trinidad and Tobago.

Mr. Vice President, as my colleagues before me have indicated, we have been consulting and collaborating on Local Government Reform in Trinidad and Tobago for a while now, and if ever there was a time to give it the final stamp of approval, that time is now.

Mr. Vice President, there is an unfortunate tendency for us to continue responding to the Opposition's continuous charade of shifting goalposts. This can only have one effect – the inability to enact sufficiently robust and progressive legislation that would lead to an enhancement in the quality of life for the citizens.

Senator Jayanti, we never said we do not want to hear from the Opposition.

A minority support was submitted. The prevailing sentiment of that Minority Report, Mr. Vice President, and indeed much of the commentary that has come from the Opposition Bench in recent time, stems from an apparent inability to trust, not just the people of Trinidad and Tobago, but to trust themselves as well.

Nowhere was this more evident than in the recent debate to replace one of the last remnants of our colonial past with something unique to our own experiences. Mr. Vice President, we are saying it is time to let go of our colonial past, but yet the members of the Opposition prefer that we hold on to it and remain wedded and beholden to those wearing powdered wigs sitting thousands of miles away from us.

The same is true for Local Government reform. We have debated this for decades. We have consulted far and wide. The Parliament Library is filled with White and Green Papers prepared and presented over the years. A million and one trees have been sacrificed to produce the reams and reams of paper containing the fruits of those deliberations and consultations. And yet, we still have an Opposition that is insisting upon even more consultation. When will the charade end, Mr. Vice President. Well as for me and my colleagues, the charade ends today. Local Government reform will become a reality and the people of Trinidad and Tobago must be the proud beneficiaries.

Because Mr. Vice President, all politics is local. Local Government and its practitioners are what touches the lives of ordinary citizens on an everyday basis. From the time you open your eyes in the morning to the time you touch down to sleep at night, Local Government is at the heart of your every movement.

It is Local Government that approves your building plans, that is responsible for garbage collection, cleaning of the drains around your houses, spraying for mosquitoes and getting rid of any other vermin. Local Government is also responsible for the play parks and recreation grounds, and even the cemeteries in which we bury our loved ones.

And it is for this reason that all of us should feel insulted by the arrogance and ignorance displayed by senior Members of the Opposition as they commented on the roles and functions of Local Government. Mr. Vice President, imagine a Senior Member of the Opposition, would go on record to say that Local Government is about “*CEPEP and stray dogs.*”

Mr. Vice President, if that was not insensitive enough, another one, who herself began her political career as an Alderman described Local Government as “*just getting your drains clean, the la basse people.*”

Mr. Vice President, as I perused the appendices that accompanied the JSC Report, I could not help but come to the conclusion that there is some dissonance between the views expressed by the senior members of the UNC who I just alluded to, and their own members on the ground.

Mr. Vice President, the written comments of the Chairman of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation and the Chief Executive Officer of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, both of which are controlled by the Opposition, are instructive in this regard.

In the case of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation, Chairman Anil Juteram, in written correspondence to the JSC stated, ***“We peruse the updated amendment on the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill 2020, and considered all changes. We look forward to working with it when it is approved in the Parliament.”***

The CEO of the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation had this to say: ***“Please be informed that the Miscellaneous Provisions (Local Government Reform) Bill 2020 was reviewed by the Couva/Tabaquite/Talparo Regional Corporation, and upon in-depth perusal, it was derived that there are no comments to be made, with respect to the Bill.”*** These comments can be found in Appendix 11 of your Committee’s report.

Mr. Vice President, I compared these comments from two UNC controlled Corporations with the Opposition’s Minority Report, and simply ask all members of the Opposition in this House to at least agree with the members of your Party who see Local Government reform as a good thing and look forward to it.

Mr. Vice President, there are many other UNC Councillors who are in support of Local Government Reform and are silently supporting this Bill. This is a good example of the disunity that exist among the rank and file of the United National Congress.

## **SECURITY OF TENURE**

Today, Mr. Vice President, I want to pay tribute to all the hardworking councillors and aldermen in our country, irrespective of their political affiliation, who continue daily to service the needs of their burgesses. More often than not, Mr. Vice President, they are the first ones on site. They are the ones who are better known by residents. They are the ones who are more accessible to the residents. Mr. Vice President, I hasten to add that this is not an indictment on any Member of Parliament, but merely an honest appreciation for the sterling work that is performed by these councillors and aldermen, often with little to show for it.

Mr. Vice President, when I think of persons like Councillor Terry Rondon who has served the people of Toco/Matelot for over 25 years, demitting office without being able to benefit from a pension, it pains me immensely. And Terry is not the only one. I am certain, in every Regional and Borough Corporation there are numerous Councillors, past and present, who have given their lifeblood to Local Government and who have retired or are about to retire, and will go home with nothing but a handshake.

That is neither fair nor just, and this Local Government Reform Bill before this House today, has the ability to change that. We, as members of this august body, have a golden opportunity, by uttering one word “yes”, to change the lives of our Councillors and by extension, the people they represent.

Mr. Vice President, there are countless Local Government Councillors labouring in the vineyards, and this Report and the accompanying Bill finally recognizes the immensity of their contribution.

This Bill legitimises what already exists in reality, that is, the employment of Councillors on a full time basis, and now provides a pathway for the brightest and the best that communities have to offer, to see politics as a viable career. The end result of this, Mr. Vice President, is the creation of a position that offers some security of tenure, that offers a decent salary as opposed to the stipend currently paid to Councillors and Aldermen, and the harmonization of the terms and conditions of those positions with that currently enjoyed by Secretaries and Assemblymen in the Tobago House of Assembly.

The Bill offers a clear organizational structure that will professionalise the operations of our Regional and Municipal Corporations, to the point where persons with specific qualifications and experience can now be appointed to the Executive Council, and so add to the storehouse of creativity available to the constituents.

Mr. Vice President, the paradigm shifts that are contained in Clause 3 of this Bill, revolutionises the way in which Local Government and its practitioners are treated. Mr. Vice President, all of our Local Government Councillors, upon completion of their tour of duty, go home without a pension, because what they received during their terms of office was an “Honorarium” and not a negotiated remuneration package.

For all the years that Terry Rondon has given to the burgesses of the Sangre Grande Regional Corporation and the constituents of Toco/Matelot to be specific, when he retires from the political realm, he does so with nothing but gratis, the good wishes and prayers of those whose lives he would have touched. And Terry is not alone in this scenario, as there are Councillors on all sides of the political aisle to whom this travesty applies.

The proposed legislation before us will, at long last, provide a remedy for that injustice, Mr. Vice President. In moving the term of office from three (3) to four (4) years as well, the Government harmonizes and flattens the curve existing between Assemblymen at the Tobago House of Assembly and Local Government Councillors in Trinidad.

Mr. Vice President, the creation of an Executive Council that is separate and apart from the Municipal Council is also a feature of this Bill that pushes it squarely into the realm of 21st century politics.



In determining the composition of the Executive Council, the Mayor or Chairman has the latitude to appoint persons with specific skills and competencies as Secretaries, to spearhead specific Divisions, something which is not now possible.

## **FINANCIAL AUTONOMY**

Mr. Vice President, one of the most fundamental changes emanating out of the proposed Bill before us is the conferring of financial autonomy on the Regional and Municipal Corporations. The ability to retain specific taxes collected within the boundaries of the respective Corporations, places the Regional and Municipal Corporations in a position to determine their own spending and savings patterns.

Mr. Vice President, not only does this make sense on a very practical level, but it also makes sense from a wider governmental perspective. I have heard my colleagues opposite argue for example, that this Government wants to get its hands on everything, and to have its fingers in every pie. This aspect of the Local Government reform extricates Central Government from that process to a very large extent, and places the onus on the respective Regional or Municipal Corporation.

Additionally, the argument as advanced, that this is a surreptitious and roundabout way of introducing property tax, is both ridiculous and disingenuous.

Mr. Vice President, the Opposition Members speak through both sides of their mouth, because the same ones who are arguing against the property tax and launched their infamous “Axe the Tax” campaign, also saw the value in it and was going to implement it.

Hear what the then Minister of Finance, Larry Howai had to say during the 2013-2014 budget presentation. He said: *"Mr. Speaker, a land and building tax regime is a key pillar in all modern tax systems. Recurrent land and building taxes meet ALL the conditions of a good and fair tax. The backbone of a successful land and building tax is the proper valuation of properties within a transparent framework. This will require the property rolls being brought up-to-date. I propose to phase in these taxes over the period 2014 to 2017, during which time the properties will be valued and consultations will be held with all stakeholders."*

He also said, *"In Phase 1 and effective immediately, we shall commence valuations of all industrial land, including plant and machinery, whether housed or unhoused, with a view to implement this tax by July 1, 2014. In Phase 2, we will impose a tax on commercial properties and in Phase 3, we will impose a tax on agricultural lands and on residential properties with a deductible allowance to provide relief to certain agricultural land owners and low-income homeowners."*

Mr. Vice President, the then Minister of Finance, Mr. Howai sought to hide the word property by saying these taxes, this tax or a tax. There is no denying that it was still property tax.

They cannot be trusted, Mr. Vice President. Many of the members of the UNC who have properties in foreign countries religiously pay their property taxes for the houses they own, yet they are speaking out against it.

Mr. Vice President, by carefully analysing the quantum of income Regional and Municipal Corporations are likely to receive from property taxes, they are in a much better position to plan their annual work programmes, to determine how many persons they can employ, and how many projects they can undertake, without having to receive any approval from Central Government.

Mr. Vice President, this level of fiscal independence will undoubtedly mute the annual cries of geographic discrimination emanating from the other side, leaving me to conclude that rather than rejoice at this development, they would prefer not to see it happen, hence their refusal to support the Committee's final report.

## DECENTRALIZATION

Mr. Vice President, the experience from jurisdictions around the world, demonstrates in no insignificant way that decentralization of the decision making process and devolution of authority, when properly implemented, is one of the most powerful and effective tools to reduce poverty and inequality, accelerate rural development, and enhance the participation of citizens in their own development. Multiple studies of decentralization in Tanzania, Uganda, Indonesia and India, among others, have all highlighted the positive impact that decentralized administrations can have on unlocking the potential of regions, improving services to people, and stimulating citizen participation in decision-making.

When administrative decentralization is matched with fiscal decentralization, Trinidad and Tobago will be able to find a path to accelerated and sustained local development, bringing long-term benefits to citizens who live in all Regional and Municipal Corporations. This, Mr. Vice President, is the best way to ensure that no one is left behind.

Mr. Vice President, there is another critical area of decentralization for which the attached Bill provides a remedy. This is the area of staffing of the various Corporations. Mr. Vice President, this Government currently spends approximately **TT\$2.4 Billion** dollars on staffing for Local Government.

It is not a matter of telling tales out of school to say that there is always the question of whether the citizens are receiving a sufficiently robust return on that investment.

I am informed that Most Corporations, Mr. Vice President are understaffed, conservatively by 20%, because of the lengthy delays by the relevant Service Commission appointing staff. Mr. Vice President, this dysfunction has been institutionalized over the years, and the underperformance of the Corporations has been normalized. The reform envisaged in the attached Bill before this Chamber, clothes the Municipal Council with the authority to hire additional staff deemed necessary, for the proper execution of the sum of obligations now expected to be fulfilled by the Corporations.

The consequent authority to discipline staff is also included in the 12<sup>th</sup> Schedule, as well as the requirement to ensure that due process is followed in all cases of discipline.

## **BUILDING SAFER COMMUNITIES**

Mr. Vice President, there are approximately **750** Municipal Police Officers on active duty across the length and breadth of this country. Additional persons are to be hired to increase the number of Municipal Police to **1500**.

In the existing structure of Local Government, Municipal Police Officers receive instructions from the already beleaguered Chief Executive Officer of the respective Corporation. Mr. Vice President, sadly, the sole function of the majority of these trained Municipal Police Officers is to watch tractors and other vehicles lodged on the compounds of the various Corporations. These officers are not allowed to respond to reports of domestic violence, larceny and other crimes. They work a normal 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. shift from Monday to Friday and cannot be found on weekends. Truth be told, they are operating as daylight security at most Corporations.

Within the context of the reform of Local Government, the Municipal Police will now be placed under the jurisdiction of the Municipal Council and will be heavily engaged in community policing.

Mr. Vice President, about 35% of the homicides committed in this country have their genesis in domestic violence and land disputes. Data from the National Domestic Violence Registry show that assault by beating, verbal abuse, malicious damage and breach of protection orders are by far the most common offences associated with domestic violence. These have increased by over 30 percent in some cases. For example, assault by beating doubled in 2021; from **451** reported cases in 2019 to **522** in 2020, **1333** in 2021 and **187** as of February this year.

Sadly, it must be noted that these are ONLY reported cases by domestic violence victims. The reality is there are numerous unreported cases.

We are of the view that the devolution of those powers to the Municipal Council will result in the Municipal Police being more visible in the community, and thus able to make earlier interventions, therefore stemming the tide of familial murders.

Municipal police officers visibly patrolling the community will have the opportunity to collaborate with the TTPS to implement proactive strategies to combat domestic violence, family violence, school violence, juvenile delinquency, robbery, gang violence, drug use in communities. Thus, maintaining social disorder and supporting healthy and safe communities.

Through the specialized training they will receive in mediation; developing, promoting and implementing strategies and programmes for public safety within their local district; and for solving neighbourhood problems, they will be equipped to serve the burgesses in their Municipal Corporation.

Mr. Vice President, the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services is responsible for the protection and enhancement of the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable populations in our country.

One such vulnerable group is street dwellers. The health and well-being of street dwellers continue to be of utmost importance to this Government.

Street dwelling is a major issue in this country and in particular, at the levels of the City and Borough Corporations. It therefore requires an integrative and collaborative approach, comprising interventions not only from the Ministry of Social Development and Family Services but from the Regional and Borough Corporations. Acknowledging this level of partnership is required, the Municipal Police can be actively utilized to help with the move along mechanism that would see street dwellers taken off the street, assessed, rehabilitated and transitioned back into society. This type of partnership can result in the Government successfully tackling the issue of homelessness in this country.

Under clause 3 of the Bill, Municipal Police will be given the legal right to issue tickets under the Motor Vehicles and Road Traffic (Enforcement and Administration) Act. This is another significant aspect of policing and it provides an avenue that is available for the raising of funds through the fines.



## **DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION**

Mr. Vice President, the final point I wish to raise with respect to the sweeping benefits of this proposed legislation, concerns the potential for widening the digitalization net and therefore narrowing the digital divide existing in this country. Many of us, Mr. Vice President, are painfully aware of the slow pace in which requests for approvals move through the Local Government system. This is so largely due to the heavily manualized processes which many have taken years to perfect. The sheer weight of that bureaucracy, with its offspring of inefficiency and lengthy delays, is heaven for the corrupt and a breeding ground for corruption.

Through digitalization, payments for permits, applications for planning permission, verification of works to be done, can all be done online. The Market Vendor will no longer have to go to the corporation to line up by a cashier, only to realize the cashier did not come to work because of COVID-19.

The homeowner or contractor, anxious to get their building drawings approved, will also be able to have this done online, thus saving precious time and money. This also means that a greater number of persons can access an even wider range of services, in quick time. This, Mr. Vice President, is how this Government has approached Local Government reform, not in a piece-meal approach, but holistically and comprehensively. We are bringing services closer to the people.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mr. Vice President, it is only the People's National Movement that has the vision and courage to advance ground breaking Local Government Reform. Trinidad and Tobago's continued development as a modern, progressive, democratic and organized country will only occur, when those entrusted with the responsibility of leadership, are able to put aside partisan and parochial interests in favour of the common good. Every Senator in this Chamber took a solemn oath to do all within their power to serve every citizen of this country. We have the opportunity at the conclusion of this debate, to live out that oath, and serve our country by supporting the adoption of this report.

The time has come to emerge from the inefficiency that has enveloped Local Government. The benefits that will accrue to the citizenry of this great Republic through the adoption of this JSC Report, far outweighs any perceived flaws in its construction, and therefore I urge all of us, to give it our unequivocal support.

I know my colleagues and I will do so.

Mr. Vice President, I thank you.