

## Minister's Statements and Speeches

### **PUBLIC BILLS**

**(29.06.2021)**

#### *Third Reading*

*On motion made and seconded, the Appropriation (2021-2022) Bill (No. X of 2021) was read the third time and passed.*

#### *Second Reading*

### **THE SUPPLEMENTARY APPROPRIATION (2020-2021) (No. 2) BILL**

**(No. XI of 2021)**

**The Vice-Prime Minister, Minister of Education, Tertiary Education, Science and Technology (Mrs L. D. Dookun-Luchoomun):** Mr Speaker, Sir, let me, at the very start of my intervention, state how shocked I am to hear the Leader of the Opposition, who was himself a former Minister of Finance, state that through the Supplementary Appropriation Bill, Government is preparing a war chest for the elections to be held in 2024. Mr Speaker, Sir, we are in 2021, we are going through a crisis and the whole world is going through the same crisis and the impact of this crisis is being felt across the world. But it seems that the Leader of the Opposition is not aware of it.

We have in this House today Mr Speaker, Sir, a Supplementary Appropriation Bill and we have to approve this Bill to the tune of Rs23.6 billion. The sum being sought is to serve a dual purpose. The first, Mr Speaker, Sir, is to consolidate the several actions undertaken here during what has been perhaps the most catastrophic crisis that have reached our shores, and the second, is to stave off a possible worsening of the situation, is there are no steps adopted to sustain the measures already put in place. Mr Speaker, Sir, perhaps this is an answer to the hon. Leader of the Opposition, who was wondering why we need to have this Appropriation of additional reserves.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I honestly do not believe that there should really be a debate over the different centrally managed initiatives that are spelt out under this Appropriation. I mean, it's

crystal clear that any Government would seek to reinforce what has worked so that it more positively responds to the needs of the day.

Let's have a quick look at the Rs9.2 billion being sought here for the National Resilience Fund. Resilience, Mr Speaker, Sir, means the ability not to take things lying down, but to bounce back, and bounce back with vengeance. Can we envisage not doing that? Can we even imagine what would have been the consequences of not engaging in innovative approaches to dealing with the pandemic? Mr Speaker, Sir, let us consider what would have been the results if urgent corrective actions and socioeconomic measures had not been taken by Government. We know that across the world Governments have resorted to different means to support their people, people who had started feeling the impact of pandemic. They obviously adopted measures that were contextually relevant to them. The measures were diverse because it was impossible; it was out of question to even think of a one size fits all scenarios.

This Government, Mr Speaker, Sir, knew that it had to come up with previously unthought-of measures, unprecedented actions that would help people to escape the economic dungeons that were looming their head. Mr Speaker, Sir, we all know what Government has done to support the very needy and we all knew that it could not be business as usual or random responses. These had to be novel, non-conformists measures. Incidentally, may I remind the House that many of these measures received a very favorable review from the UNDP, and even the IMF, in spite of what the hon. Leader of the Opposition has just said.

And, what were these measures, Mr Speaker, Sir? We have talked about the Government Wage Assistance Scheme; we have talked about the Self- Employed Assistance Scheme and the one-off grant to self-employed people. Such and similar schemes have proved to be most beneficial, Mr Speaker, Sir. It's only those who do not want to see it that would say so, that would say that it had not been beneficial. We do realise that within 10 days of the launch of the Self-Employed Assistance Scheme and the Wage Assistance Scheme, there were already 175,000 applications received at the MRA and these applications were online, Mr Speaker, Sir. Officers have been working in spite of the confinement to support these people. We should also remember that these two schemes supplied as well for impacted operators, employers and self-employed posts in the Red Zones, as well as mentioned by the Minister of Finance.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the amounts invested - I will not say spent - in the Government Wage Assistance Scheme and Self-Employed Assistance Scheme are indicative of their effective reach. Thus, as at 09 June 2021, the Government Wage Assistance Scheme concerned 278,982 employees while the Self-Employed Assistance Scheme involved 260,886 beneficiaries. The total amount disbursed stood at Rs16 billion and for the Self-Employed Assistance Scheme, around Rs6.6 billion.

*Mr Speaker, Sir,* il y a des familles mauriciennes qui vivent au jour le jour et, pendant le confinement, sans l'aide apportée par l'Etat, cela aurait été catastrophique pour eux. Il fallait à tout prix éviter ce scénario qui aurait pu nous mener vers une explosion sociale. Government has put forward a number of COVID-19 related socio-economic measures and there is no doubt that these have mitigated the impact on the vulnerable segments of society.

We do realise, as a caring Government, that many people living in dire conditions need an economic safety net, need something to fall back on. It is our moral and ethical duty as Government to safeguard their livelihoods, to ensure some comfort to them because, Mr Speaker, Sir, the damage caused to them is more than just collateral. It is hard. It is direct.

Mr Speaker, Sir, this is why the Minister of Finance is preparing himself because we are living in a world of uncertainty. COVID has brought its lot of uncertainty and we need to prepare ourselves and get ready to be able to react and to respond timelessly. We had to intervene and we will continue to intervene as a protective gesture, if any, and if and when the need arises. I have said it before, Mr Speaker, Sir, not supporting those who are economically vulnerable is absolutely out of question for this Government. We are a caring Government. We have shown that we can act and act timelessly and effectively because, Mr Speaker, Sir, we do have a conscience. Had we not adopted these measures, the crisis would have been real and hard-hitting.

Mr Speaker, Sir, the measures adopted to avert the ill-effects of the crisis, are clearly visible in the Health and Education Sectors. For me, they are both deeply intertwined. We believe in herd immunity and that is why the Supplementary Appropriation Bill makes a direct allusion to the vaccination process. Mr Speaker, Sir, today we know that as the situation stands, one out of two adults has already been vaccinated. We have covered 48% of the population and we should be soon getting to the 60% mark that would provide us general immunity. And, Mr Speaker, Sir, we shall be getting there soon.

Mr Speaker, Sir, this concerns as much my Ministry as it concerns the Ministry of Health and Wellness. We have to ensure the necessary health-checks of those that are directly linked to schools - school staff, service providers and others, so as to protect our children. If this means introducing additional measures to increase public confidence in vaccination, so be it. But as matters stand now, we cannot walk away from our responsibility to protect and ensure the safety of all our learners. Their health and their security as well as their mental health are uppermost in our consideration. I am glad to state, Mr Speaker, Sir that more than 90% of the school personnel have already been vaccinated and we are moving ahead. What does this indicate, Mr Speaker, Sir? It indicates that Government is primarily concerned with protecting the population at large and this, at any cost. I can assure the House that the country will not witness a scrooge-like miserly stewardship where the well-being of the population is concerned.

In this context, allow me, Mr Speaker, Sir, to briefly refer to the COVID-19 Project Development Fund. All economists will confirm that our GDP has contracted because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, the biggest dip in our GDP was recorded in the second quarter of the 2020 as it contracted by 32.5%. Now, we all know how this will impact on our economy, on our people. Mr Speaker, Sir, I will not go deep into the economic analysis but I will simply insist on the fact that the economic recovery plan, *le plan de relance et de l'investissement et de l'économie*, has to necessarily be fully implemented and that too, timelessly. This plan comprises a series of measures and these target boosting GDP and growth, protecting jobs, creating new ones, reducing dependence on imports and improving the overall wellbeing of the population. These cannot be avoided if we want to give a spring to the heels of our economy.

Mr Speaker, Sir, allow me to refer to item 28222023 - *Write-off of loans* that has a direct pertinence to my Ministry, especially where Polytechnics Mauritius is concerned. You will recall, Mr Speaker, Sir, that the former regime, prior to 2014, had come up with a project relating to the construction of campuses and the premises of which were to be rented to public and private operators in the higher education sector. In this connection, a loan of Rs486 m. was extended by the Ministry of Finance to the then Knowledge Parks Ltd and Knowledge Parks Ltd was a purely commercial vehicle that was expected to repay the loan from revenue collected as rent from these institutions.

Mr Speaker, Sir, when this Government came to power in late 2014, we came up with the idea of setting up Polytechnics Mauritius. This body had to launch work ready programmes that are aligned to the nation's select sectors of the economy and Polytechnics Mauritius Ltd has become a flagship organisation that now leads the way in putting a new face on technical education. It has successfully attracted more than 2000 students after only three years of operation. Since the premises are not rented but instead of welcoming students enrolling for technical education, the question of repaying the loan no longer holds nor is it warranted.

As of 31 March 2021, it is to my understanding that the loan stood at Rs810 m., including accrued interest. I am, therefore, deeply grateful to my colleague, the Minister of Finance, who has positively considered the request to write-off this loan. Indeed, the writing off of the loan is a clear-cut signal of the importance this Government attaches to our ambition to give technical education its rightful place. We want to create the conditions whereby students of technical education of today, will become the creators of jobs for tomorrow.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I would continue by taking another item under the ESE, item 26323058 – *National Environment and Climate Change Fund*. Mr Speaker, Sir, it is important for us to remember that Mauritius is the seventh most vulnerable country in the world so far as the impact of climate change is concerned.

Petit Etat insulaire que nous sommes, il n'y a pas mal d'enjeux majeurs qui nous rendent vulnérables. Nous avons l'érosion de nos plages, la montée des eaux, les *landslides*, les *flashfloods*. Donc, ce n'est que louable que nous allouons R 2 milliards de fonds supplémentaire pour le ministère de l'environnement afin de sauvegarder nos plages et de mitiger les effets du changement climatique.

Mr Speaker, Sir, yes, we are all concerned about the settlement of the STC's liability to Betamax as a direct consequence of the ruling of the Privy Council. I will simply state that effecting the monetary settlement only goes to prove how deliberately ironclad the modalities of the contract had been worked out as highlighted in the ruling of the Supreme Court of Mauritius.

Mais, M. le président, ceux qui, de l'autre côté de la Chambre, se réjouissent et viennent nous pointer du doigt, ne perdent rien à attendre. Laissons la Commission d'enquête faire son travail. *We shall separate the wheat from the chaff* et la vérité émergera, M. le président.

M. le président, je comprends que le Leader de l'Opposition est en faveur de l'instauration de cette commission d'enquête et nous allons attendre avec lui les *findings* de cette commission parce que la vérité, comme je l'ai dit, M. le président, émergera et cela certainement.

M. le président, nous faisons tous confiance au ministre des Finances et nous faisons confiance à toutes les mesures annoncées dans son Budget. Il s'agit là des dépenses éminemment justifiables pour servir l'intérêt du peuple de notre République.

Merci M. le président.