

**FREE TRAVEL SCHEME -
PENSIONERS, HANDICAPPED AND STUDENTS (09/05/06)**

The Leader of the Opposition (Mr N. Bodha) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Public Infrastructure, Land Transport and Shipping whether in regard to the scheme for the provision of free public transport to pensioners, handicapped persons and students, he will state -

- (a) the expenditure incurred thereon since its implementation to date and to which operators;
- (b) the number of pensioners, handicapped persons and students who have benefited from the scheme to date;
- (c) the monitoring mechanism to ensure the cost effectiveness and efficiency thereof, and
- (d) whether the scheme will be reviewed in the near future.

The Deputy Prime Minister, Minister of Public Infrastructure, Land Transport and Shipping (Dr. R. Beebejaun): Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, as the House is aware *L'Alliance Sociale* took a commitment to introduce a free travel scheme by public transport for students, pensioners and the handicapped. The Government, under the leadership of the Prime Minister, made good that commitment soon after taking office. This decision will be recorded in golden letters in the history of our socialist Government.

May I recall that the fundamental principle underlying the free travel scheme is to relieve parents, particularly from the vulnerable groups, the financial burden relating to travelling expenses for their children that usually impedes access to free education by these children. Thus, access to free education is greatly facilitated.

In the case of old age pensioners and the disabled persons, the policy helps to improve their quality of life, through better access to healthy, social and leisure activities.

The scheme was implemented in two phases – for old age pensioners and disabled persons on 15 August 2005 and for the students on 01 September 2005 well within the 100 days of the coming into office of this Government.

Despite the problems encountered during the implementation of the scheme, this measure has become an important instrument through which we

can look forward to our cherished objective of further democratisation of education and ensuring full mobility of our senior citizens.

As regards part (a) of the question, the overall expenditure incurred from the date of implementation to the end of April 2006 is as follows -

Mauritius Rodrigues

Students : Rs249.8 m. Rs7.1 m.

Pensioners/Handicapped Persons : Rs126.8 m. Rs2.8 m.

Total : Rs376.6 m. Rs9.9 m.

The operators which benefited from the scheme are bus companies and the individual bus operators providing public transport. These are the National Transport Corporation, the United Bus Service, the Triolet Bus Service, the Rose-Hill Transport, the Mauritian Bus Transport and some 855 individual bus operators.

As regards part (b) of the question, the information, inclusive of Rodrigues, is as follows -

(i) The totality, i.e. 120,000 old age pensioners and disabled persons are eligible and are benefiting from the scheme. May I remind the House that the scheme is travel anywhere, any time and any place;

(ii) Students -

Primary - 24,000

Secondary - 125,000

Post-secondary - 11,000

Total - 160,000

As regards part (c) of the question, monitoring committees have been constituted at the level of the National Transport Authority, the Ministry of Education and Human Resources, the Ministry of Social Security, National Solidarity and Senior Citizens Welfare and Reform Institutions and the Head of the Department of Public Infrastructure (Rodrigues) to look into the day-to-day operational issues. Over and above these committees, there is a Central Monitoring Committee at the level of my Ministry, which is chaired by the Senior Chief Executive. The Central Monitoring Committee which comprises all the stakeholders, including representatives of bus companies and the individual operators, ensures that the desired objectives of the scheme are met.

A Ministerial Task Force under my chairmanship and comprising the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Tourism, Leisure and External

Communications, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance and Economic Development, the Minister of Environment and National Development Unit, the Minister of Social Security, National Solidarity and Senior Citizens Welfare and Reform Institutions, the Minister of Education and Human Resources and the Attorney-General, Minister of Justice and Human Rights, meets regularly to assess the effectiveness of the scheme and to make appropriate policy decisions.

As regards the cost-effectiveness of the scheme, I am informed that the National Transport Authority carries out regular surveys on the fleet utilisation rate of bus operators. Payment for services are effected strictly for days on which the service is effectively provided. In that respect, a sum of Rs545,000 has not been paid to those operators whose buses have remained off the road.

To date, the payment due to fifteen (15) operators has been withheld for failing to provide services or refusal to take on board any student or pensioner. This represents an amount of Rs212,000. Furthermore, the licences of 12 drivers and conductors have been suspended for the same offence.

The National Transport Authority is daily monitoring bus services throughout the island to ensure that adequate services are provided for the benefit of students and pensioners. To that effect, bus services have been redirected in regions where buses are not operating, and some bus operators have been authorised to introduce dedicated school bus services for colleges which are located off the main bus routes.

To further improve the efficiency of the scheme and prevent the use of fraudulent bus passes, the National Transport Authority has introduced a new student identity card as from October 2005, giving maximum details of students therein, such as the name, address of the student and institution attended, and duration of terms. I am informed that the Ministry of Social Security, National Solidarity & Senior Citizens Welfare and Reform Institutions is also in the process of issuing new identity cards for old age pensioners and disabled persons.

As regards part (d), the existing scheme is being extended until December 2006. The present system has met many of its objectives but as in any scheme, it has weaknesses, such as -

(i) free travel on board stage carriage buses exclusively has led to an increased mobility, resulting in lack of capacity in terms of buses, specially during peak hours;

- (ii) lack of buses results in many late arrivals at school and sometimes absenteeism;
- (iii) some bus operators prefer to pick up normal fare-paying passengers and thus leave students stranded on bus stops;
- (iv) some operators do not observe established itineraries and skip some “loops”, with a view to reserving accommodation for fare paying passengers on subsequent bus stops;
- (v) cases of students malingering during or even after school hours have been reported, thus defeating the whole philosophy underlying the free travel scheme;
- (vi) the actual system does not cater for regions where bus services are inadequate or simply not available;
- (vii) the business of taxis and contract buses has been affected to a certain extent and this has led to protests and representations from these operators, and
- (viii) very importantly, misbehaviour of bus crew towards students and vice versa.

In the meantime, my Ministry will continue consultations with all stakeholders to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the scheme and come up with appropriate recommendations for consideration by Government. In this context, my Ministry will soon enlist the services of a consultant to look into the economics and the efficiency of the existing scheme and of alternative options of implementing the policy of free travel.

The recent decision of the Commissioner of Police to set up a *Police du Transport* within the Police Force will certainly give a boost to the duties being carried out by the inspectorate staff of the National Transport Authority throughout the island. Following my meeting with the Commissioner of Police last week, I assure that the collaboration between the *Police du Transport*, the National Transport Authority and Traffic Management and Road Safety Unit will improve the enforcement of best practices in the public transport sector as a whole.

Finally, Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I wish to assure the House in no uncertain terms that this Government remains committed to the principle of providing free public transport to students, pensioners and handicapped on well-formulated criteria, so that we use our limited resources in a responsible and disciplined manner.

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I thank the Deputy Prime Minister for his answer, but we see that he, himself, mentioned a number of weaknesses. We know how the scheme was announced as a political

promise...

The Deputy Speaker: I supposed the hon. Leader of the Opposition has a question then.

Mr Bodha: ...on 01 May 2005. In the answer to the PNQ, which was put by hon. Bérenger, the figure the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned, as an estimate then, was Rs600 m. for the whole year. The figure he has mentioned for seven months is about Rs376 m., which means that it is above the Rs50 m. earmarked per month. Does that mean that this scheme is going to cost Government more than Rs600 m.?

Dr. Beebeejaun: As at present, the estimated value is Rs385 m. for students and about Rs185 m. for old age pensioners and handicapped persons.

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, in the answer to the PNQ, the Deputy Prime Minister had said that he would have a data monitored every day by the NTA, as to the fleet, the number of buses, and the number of buses which were operative. How was this done for the payment to each company and individual bus companies?

Dr. Beebeejaun: I answered this question in the past. When it was calculated, it was done on a basis of figures already worked out by the NTA on bus trips and trips divided between old age pensioners, students using bus passes and others. On that calculated figure, we came to whatever has been announced. I think I replied to that in detail last time when hon. Bérenger asked this question. I must say that whatever was calculated by the NTA on the basis of available data - which are being compiled every day - it was not compiled just for the free transport system - it was existent already. They knew the number of trips by students, the number of trips by old age pensioners, because there were special tariffs for these categories and, therefore, it was calculated on that basis.

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Deputy Prime Minister mentioned that there were 855 bus operators. How could we monitor that on a daily basis, that is, which bus was left in the garage, which bus was operative? May I know also whether a payment has been made to each bus?

Dr. Beebeejaun: Of course, this is one of the problems that arose. When the scheme was introduced and a calculation made, it was not done on the basis of the individual bus operator using his bus every day on school days. It was not made on that basis. It was made on the basis that they

would miss four to five days out of the 20-21 school days of a month, and calculated thereby. There is also a monitoring system. I can assure the Leader of the Opposition that the monitoring system does exist, and he has seen himself from the answer I have given that a considerable amount of money – Rs545,000 – has not been paid because they were not operating on those days, and this applies to the individual bus operators.

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, this measure, in fact, has been implemented without a comprehensive survey. The Deputy Prime Minister had announced then that he would come with a comprehensive survey to correct this measure, but it is still an ill-planned measure. Now, the Deputy Prime Minister is saying that a consultant is going to come, to see to it how to make the system better. May I ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether he is satisfied with what is happening today and whether he has come to a final solution with the planification of the scheme?

Dr. Beebejaun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is an interesting question that the Leader of the Opposition is putting. The problem of transport is a moving target, and we have to adjust. When we started the system, it was on the basis of so many people travelling, but the pattern has changed. It has evolved; there has been changing behaviour of beneficiaries. The first thing we have noted is the tremendous use by the senior citizens to travel, and this is a tribute to the effectiveness of the system. But, it has led to certain complications. First, the use made by our senior citizens has increased tremendously. Second, is the new habit of travelling as well. Now, our senior citizens are travelling to accompany their grandchildren to school and back. They are enjoying the privileges of the system, and this has led, during peak hours – specially in the morning – to a problem of transport capacity. Second, students who were not travelling by bus last year are travelling by bus as from the beginning of this year. So, the travelling population has changed. We had a complete survey in October with regard to primary, secondary, tertiary, post secondary education, and I will certainly lay it on the Table of the Assembly. My reading of this survey is that things have changed since. I don't know whether it is by 10%-15%, but it is a moving target. The NTA has also carried out an origin to destination survey of all secondary schools, and it is being studied. What we are doing is getting an outsider, – it's good to have an outsider - a consultant to look into the problem, accompany us on this. There is no harm in this. The consultant will probably suggest some alternatives. We leave it to him, but we are still there. The consultant is not going to take over. Every system in place will continue functioning, and the consultant will advise us as to the best practice.

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Deputy Prime Minister also mentioned earlier that all the stakeholders will be taken on board. There are 640 contract buses which carry school children and many of them have gone out of business. How is the Deputy Prime Minister going to include them on board in the new scheme?

Dr. Beebeejaun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, we often hear that many contract bus for schools have gone out of business, but the hon. Leader of the Opposition will be interested to know that we have more requests for school buses today than ever. I don't know where the problem is. We have to find out. We will put it to the consultant and see what happens. But, believe me, it is a fact that we are full of requests for transport of students.

Mr Bodha: Does the Deputy Prime Minister envisage the possibility that a monthly allowance be paid to the contract buses?

Dr. Beebeejaun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, no possibility is excluded, but any system that we introduce will have its weaknesses. There is an option, of course, to pay direct to parents, but this will also have shortcomings whether we use it for travel or for other purposes. There are many other shortcomings but this is my main concern. We are going to look into it and take the decision as and when it is necessary.

Mr Dowarkasing: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the hon.. Deputy Prime Minister state whether any new licences to private operators has been given since this scheme has been put in force?

Dr. Beebeejaun: May I ask to what licence for what operators is the hon. Member referring to?

Mr Dowarkasing: The private bus operators licence.

Dr. Beebeejaun: If there is any, it is very few. I have not got the figures, but scarcely any.

Mr Dowarkasing: In a recent question, the Deputy Prime Minister stated that there are about 851 private bus operators in the island and, today, he came up with the figures of 855. We want to know whether there is a fluctuation in figures day after day.

(Interruptions)

The Deputy Speaker: This has nothing to do with the question.

(Interruptions)

Order!

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Speaker, Sir, is the Deputy Prime Minister aware that there was already a scheme for employees of sugar industry to get refund of the money spent by the children on bus transport? Is he aware that the scheme was existing and what has happened to the refund to students? Are they still receiving the refund or not?

Dr. Beebeejaun: My colleague, the Ministry of Agro-Industry, had already replied to this question. Care is being taken for this particular group of students.

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Is the Deputy Prime Minister aware of the fact that a sum of more than Rs18 m. was being spent on these children's transport and this money has gone back to the sugar industry? I would like to ask the Deputy Prime Minister whether there are any chances of getting this money to fund this project of free transport to students as it seems to be quite a burden on the Budget?

The Deputy Speaker: I wonder whether this is not a question for the Minister of Agriculture.

(Interruptions)

Mrs Dookun-Luchoomun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, what I wanted to know is whether in this particular scheme, there are any chances of getting this money back to the Department for Public Transport and find whether this can be used for the school children?

Dr. Beebeejaun: Any weaknesses or shortcomings of the system will be addressed. We'll take it into consideration. We had representations as soon as it came up that parents were going to be paid directly though a decision has not been taken. But we take note of what the hon. Member said and we will consider it along with the other problems that are arising

Mr Bodha: The Deputy Prime Minister mentioned in his answer last time that a swipe card would be used in the buses and in October 2005 we were told a student card was given to the student and now we have learned that another card is going to be given as from July. May I know what is going to be done for each student to benefit from the scheme in the coming

months?

Dr. Beebeejaun: Nothing has changed in the scheme since December. It is still the same.

(Interruptions)

What we are doing is that we are having different cards for primary, secondary, tertiary and post-secondary students. It is easy to identify and I say that it is almost impossible to falsify. This idea was to address the problem of fraudulent use. Having said that, the question of swipe card has been addressed. It has not been discarded. We had a representation from the State Bank which came up with what it entails in terms of equipment, of having devices on the bus for special swipe card and so on. We have also had expressions of interest from other bodies – all of them are unsolicited - about the setting up of such a system and we are asking the consultant to look at this as well.

Mrs Martin: Mr Speaker, Sir, may I know from the hon. Deputy Prime Minister whether the scheme also applies to foreign students studying in Mauritius?

Dr. Beebeejaun: Well, we have not...

(Interruptions)

It is a good point. What we are doing is that full-time university students benefit from that. We don't exclude anyone

Mrs Hanoomanjee: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, if I understood well the Deputy Prime Minister, this scheme is not implemented in routes where there is no bus service actually. But as the scheme was supposed to be one of fairness, can we know what the Monitoring Committee has decided on this issue? I understand that the old age pensioners and the students are not benefiting from free transport in these localities where bus service is not available.

Dr. Beebeejaun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, it is a fact that, as far as transport is concerned, there are certain black areas. What we have done is that we have sent dedicated buses to these areas through the NTA and CNT. They have been going to these areas for students especially, but it does raise a problem to the old age, but I can assure the hon. Member we are asking the consultant to again look at it. There is a long list. We have received

comments and proposals for improvement as well and we will ask the consultants to look at all of them. It is a fact that there are areas where, I won't say, no transport exists, because there is no area in Mauritius where there is no transport, but there are areas where transport is a bit more difficult than in others.

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, the Deputy Prime Minister has said that the scheme may be reviewed in December. May I ask him whether we will move away from free transport to a transport allowance to students?

Dr. Beebeejaun: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, I would like to read again what I said in my reply. I said:

'I wish to assure the House in no uncertain terms that this Government remains committed to the principle of providing free public transport to students, pensioners and handicapped on wellformulated criteria, so that we use of our limited resources in a responsible and disciplined manner'

This is the philosophy of this Government and we are not departing from that. I would like to ask the Leader of the Opposition: 'should in the unlikely – and I say unlikely - event or the change in Government, are they envisaging to remove the free transport'?

Mr Bodha: Mr Deputy Speaker, Sir, can the Deputy Prime Minister say unequivocally that we will have free transport and not an allowance to students?

The Deputy Speaker: I think that this question has already been replied to.

Dr. Beebeejaun: As I have said, the principle remains. How will it be implemented? All the options will be addressed.

The Deputy Speaker: Time is over.