

## **FREE PUBLIC TRANSPORT SCHEME – STUDY (19/07/16)**

**(No. B/797) Mr P. Jhugroo (Second Member for Mahebourg & Plaine Magnien)** asked the Minister of Public Infrastructure and Land Transport whether, in regard to the Free Public Transport Scheme, he will state if consideration is being given for a review of the present policy thereof and for the introduction of alternative measures in respect of the elderly persons, the students and the other beneficiaries thereof.

**Mr Bodha:** Madam Speaker, in my reply to question B/468 at the sitting of the National Assembly on 08 September 2015, I drew the attention of the House that the present system is fraught with a number of flaws and a study would be carried out to re-engineer the whole public transport system. This would include an assessment of the free bus travel scheme and recommendations for a more transparent, efficient and cost effective management of the free transport payment mechanism effected by Government to bus operators since a number of years now.

Madam Speaker, after a tender exercise the contract for consultancy services for a study to re-engineer the public transport industry in Mauritius was awarded on 29 June 2016 to PricewaterhouseCoopers. The consultant would start the assignment on the date of signature of the contract agreement which is due in the days to come and the study will be completed within a period of six months.

We will await the recommendations of the Consultants and I welcome any valid proposal from Members of the House for this study to be the best we can have.

**Mr Jhugroo:** Can the hon. Minister inform the House since the introduction of this scheme, how many cases have been reported to his Ministry whereby bus drivers refused to pick up elderly persons and students in the morning while going to school?

**Mr Bodha:** I don't have the exact figure, but we know that we have had numerous complaints and there have been disciplinary committees which have been held by the National Transport Authority.

**Mr Jhugroo:** Can the hon. Minister state whether there have been cases where bus owners have been paid while the buses were not operating and, if so, can we know how many and what action has been taken against these bus owners?

**Mr Bodha:** No, I don't have the number, Madam. But, I know that there have been many complaints and we know that this system which has cost us over the years from 2005 to now about Rs10 billion and it is costing us today Rs1.2 billion and it is a system where, in fact, the NTA just acts as a paying agent. There is no accountability. In fact, there was a Private Notice Question by the hon. Leader of the Opposition when the poor student fell down from the bus. Then we implemented a system where we have now accountability

and we know which bus goes to which school, at what time, who are the drivers, the conductors and the number of students travelling. We have no account.

In fact, as regards the elderly, it is based only on a presumption that 40% of the elderly travelled. We know all the abuse that has been done, students, old age pensioners and disabled people are not picked up; students arrived late at school and that school buses picked up students late at school in the afternoon. Bus operators are unwilling to provide school buses and also of buses staying at home and getting the allowance! So, for the first time it is going to be a thorough study which will see to it that we have an accountable system. I think we should have an electronic system where we pay only when the students have travelled or when the elderly have travelled. I think this study will help us to see also a more cost-effective system. I am sure that we should be able to make less wastage in the way this is being done. It has been, at least, one billion per year for the last ten years.

**Mr Baloomoody:** Can I ask the hon. Minister whether in that study he will include the fate of students who are disabled, who cannot travel by public transport and that a specific provision be made for them so that they can attend universities and schools?

**Mr Bodha:** That is where the semi-low floor buses come in. In fact, everywhere now we have low-floor buses. I think that addressing this problem for the elderly, for the disabled, is going to be a priority in the study.

**Dr. Sorefan:** Will the hon. Minister inform the House, knowing that PricewaterhouseCoopers is an auditing company, whether it has the experience in doing transport studies or will it subcontract this study to other people and knowing very well also that we have studies from the University of Mauritius. In fact, Mr Raghuputt did some studies. What happened to all these studies which we have been hearing in the past years?

**Mr Bodha:** The *Cahier des Charges*, terms of reference has been made. A tender exercise was carried out. We have also had the approval of the *Agence Française de Développement* as regards the choice of the Consultant. This consultancy is going to cost us Rs15 m. and it is going to be funded by *l'Agence Française de Développement*.

**Mr Jhugroo:** Can the hon. Minister confirm to the House that since the introduction of this scheme, there have been many school vans all over the island carrying school children in the morning and in the afternoon whereby these school children do not get the privilege of having free transport, and if so, what measure will the hon. Minister consider to take?

**Mr Bodha:** I think we should not start something we cannot stop. I would like to answer to what hon. Dr. Sorefan said with regard to the studies done. In fact, a few studies have

been done and the terms of reference is to see to it that we make good use of the available data and documents. Madam Speaker, all the studies carried out in the past have shown one thing, that it was the least worst solution. I think what we should do now is to find the best effective solution.

**Madam Speaker:** Last question on this, hon. Jhugroo!

**Mr Jhugroo:** Will the hon. Minister agree with me that the school vans carrying the students are doing a better job than the bus owners carrying students in the morning?

**Mr Bodha:** This is a matter of opinion, Madam Speaker. I do not think so.

**Madam Speaker:** Hon. Jhugroo, next question!