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CLERK OF THE ASSEMBLY

TOBAGO HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY

THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 24th, 2022

The House met at 1.45 p.m.

PRAYERS

[MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER *in the Chair*]

ANNOUNCEMENTS

LEAVE OF ABSENCE

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: Members, the leave requested to be absent from today's Sitting were submitted by:

- (a) Councillor Tashia Burris;
- (b) Assemblyman Dr. Faith B. Yisrael;
- (c) Assemblyman Terance Baynes; and
- (d) Assemblyman Megan Morrison

The leave is granted.

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: *Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy.*

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Papers

**HON. CHIEF SECRETARY AND SECRETARY OF FINANCE,
TRADE AND THE ECONOMY** (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine):

Thank you, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer and Members of this House, I wish to lay
in the House the following papers:

PAPERS LAID

- (i) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at the end of January, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];
- (ii) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at the end of February, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];
- (iii) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at the end of March, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];
- (iv) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at the end of April, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];

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Papers (Cont'd)

HON. CHIEF SECRETARY (Cont'd)

- (v) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at the end of May, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];
- (vi) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at the end of June, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];
- (vii) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at the end of July, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];
- (viii) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at the end of August, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];
- (ix) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at the end of September, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];
- (x) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at October, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];

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Papers (Cont'd)

HON. CHIEF SECRETARY (Cont'd)

- (xi) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at November, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)]; and
- (xii) Tobago House of Assembly Monthly Budget Report as at December, 2021. [Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy (Hon. Farley Chavez Augustine)];

Mr. Deputy Presiding Officer, given the number of papers to be laid, (which is owing to the fact that the House did not meet until December of last year), I am requesting of the House, that these papers be delivered to Members, as it will be difficult to provide all on the desk today.

ORAL ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: *Minority Leader.*

EX-GRATIA PAYMENT

1. The Minority Leader asked the Chief Secretary and Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy the following question:

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Oral Answers to Questions (Cont'd)
MR. K. MORRIS (Cont'd)

As it relates to the Ex-Gratia payment promised by December 25th, 2021 to every Tobago House of Assembly worker during the campaign leading up to the December 6th, 2021 elections, will the Chief Secretary please indicate the following:

- (a) What is the status of the ex-gratia payments promised to all THA workers;
- (b) How much money will be paid to each THA worker to whom such a payment applies?
- (c) What is the total estimated cost of these payments across Divisions of the Tobago House of Assembly?

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: *Hon. Chief Secretary and Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy.*

HON. CHIEF SECRETARY: Thank you, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer - a very brave question indeed.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, with regards to the ex-gratia payment that was promised to every Tobago House of Assembly worker during the election campaign and was promised to be delivered by December 25th,

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Oral Answers to Questions (Cont'd)
HON. CHIEF SECRETARY (Cont'd)

2021, I have publicly announced previously, that such payments are delayed. I can inform the House that at this time, that these ex-gratia payments will be made available at the end of this fiscal year. The fiscal year ends in September.

Additionally, it is too early to determine how much would be paid per Tobago House of Assembly worker (THA), as I previously publicly announced that the ex-gratia payment will be as funds are available,

Thirdly, the total cost would only be determined by the number of workers across the Divisions of the Tobago House of Assembly at the time of payment. Therefore, it is too early to be able to give an accurate estimate of the total number of costs. Ball park figure, however, will be somewhere in the region of twenty million dollars (\$20m).

SUPPLEMENTAL

MR. K. MORRIS: Given that the PDP (Progressive Democratic Patriots) during the campaign, gave a definitive quantum of payment to each THA worker, is the Chief Secretary prepared to renege on that promise?

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Oral Answers to Questions (Cont'd)

HON. CHIEF SECRETARY: The Chief Secretary and the Secretary of Finance, Trade and the Economy is prepared to be unlike his predecessor and be fiscally responsible. Therefore, as indicated publicly before, the ex-gratia payment will be made. Those payments will be in accordance to funds that are actually available and whatever is available, we will share it equally among all Tobago House of Assembly workers. After all, as Tobagonians, we know how to share equally and fairly. [*Desk thumping*]

Oral Answers to Questions (Cont'd)

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: *Minority Councillor.*

RESUMPTION OF INTERNATIONAL FLIGHTS TO TOBAGO

2. **Mrs. Petal Daniel-Benoit:** Thank you Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer.

The Minority Councillor asked the Secretary of Tourism, Culture, Antiquities and Transportation the following question:

With the resumption of international flights to Tobago and the return of British Airways flights from London Gatwick to Tobago on January 10th, 2022, will the Secretary please indicate the following:

- (a) When did negotiations begin and bookings reopened for the resumption of British Airways flights from London Gatwick to Tobago?
- (b) Identify all other international flights that are expected to arrive in Tobago in 2022; the date of arrival; the name of the airline, the country of departure and the date of commencement of negotiations of all international flights listed.

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: *Leader of Assembly Business.*

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Oral Answers to Questions (Cont'd)

**SECRETARY OF EDUCATION, RESEARCH & TECHNOLOGY
AND LEADER OF ASSEMBLY BUSINESS** (Mrs. Zorisha Hackett):

Thank you, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer.

The question has to be deferred owing to the absence of the Secretary of Tourism, Culture, Antiquities & Transportation.

Question deferred to next sitting.

PRIVATE BUSINESS

MOTION

**REQUEST FOR THE EXECUTIVE COUNCIL TO DEVELOP A REMOTE
WORKFORCE MANAGEMENT POLICY TO BE IMPLEMENTED IN ALL
DIVISIONS/AGENCIES OF THE TOBAGO HOUSE OF ASSEMBLY**

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: Minority Leader, please be reminded that you have forty (40) minutes of speaking time to move the Motion and thirty (30) minutes of speaking time to wrap up at the end of the debate.

To the other Members presenting, you are given thirty (30) minutes speaking time to present and an additional ten (10) minutes if requested by another Member on your behalf.

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Request for the Executive Council to Develop
A Remote Workforce Management Policy to be
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MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER (Cont'd)

Minority Leader, you may begin.

MINORITY LEADER (Mr. Kelvon Morris): Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I wish to thank you for the opportunity to present my maiden contribution as Minority Leader on this Motion that bears my name:

“WHEREAS, according to the Public Health Ordinance Ch.12 No.4, regulations made by the Minister under section 105 and confirmed by the President under section 167 of the Public Health Ordinance on September 12th, 2020, indicates that all non-essential workers shall remain at home until such time as indicated;

AND WHEREAS the Tobago House of Assembly has adopted similar measures to regulate the workforce;

AND WHEREAS the Divisions and their employees have faced various challenges in their efforts to establish a formal policy;

BE IT RESOLVED that this House mandates the Administration to develop a remote workforce management policy to be implemented throughout all the divisions and agencies of the Tobago House of Assembly, as a matter of urgency.”

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MR. K. MORRIS (Cont'd)

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, with your permission, I take leave to place on the records of this Honorable House, my sincerest gratitude to the Tobago Council of the People's National Movement (PNM) and the residents of the electoral district of Darrel Spring/Whim, whose support ensured that there is an alternative voice represented inside the Assembly Chamber and the spirit of democracy is preserved in Tobago.

As Minority Leader and a proud Member of the oldest political organization in Trinidad and Tobago, the People's National Movement (PNM), I give the assurance to you, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, and the people of Tobago, that this Minority Council of which I lead, will always act in Tobago's best interest at all times. Rest assured, we will not just oppose our Colleagues on the majority side for opposing sake – quite the contrary.

We will approach each issue with a sound mind and a compassionate heart ensuring that in the final analysis, Tobago's issues are resolved to the benefit of every Tobagonian.

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MR. K. MORRIS (Cont'd)

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, for us in the PNM and I as Minority Leader, we believe that the policies we discuss in this House must at all times seek to either make the lives of our citizens easier, or their circumstances better. These are not just vain words aimed at attaining social media likes, but are genuine intentions and are actively demonstrated through the objectives of this Motion.

Today, the Minority Council is proposing the implementation of a remote workforce management policy within the Tobago House of the Assembly to ensure that the various Divisions of the Assembly continue to operate effectively while we adjust to the challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I know that many citizens might not be aware of what exactly is a remote workforce policy, therefore please allow me to explain in layman terms, the concept of a remote workforce policy.

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MR. K. MORRIS (Cont'd)

A remote workforce policy simply put, is an agreement that allows employees to work from home instead of going into an office. It clearly outlines when; how; why and the circumstances upon which an employee can work from locations other than the office or on a flexible work schedule.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I am sure that we each have our own personal stories of how difficult it has been trying to balance our careers and family life even before the pandemic. Similarly, I am almost certain that many of us would much rather have the convenience of working from home than having to go through the daily headache of waking up early, yet having to endure frustrating traffic congestions among the many other challenges that come with working at an office.

It was just a couple of days ago, I commissioned a non-scientific poll on both my *'twitter'* and *'instagram'* accounts, where respondents were asked to indicate which work arrangement they would much rather prefer. Unsurprisingly, the majority of respondents on both angles indicated that

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they would much rather work from home. However, there were about thirty-five percent (35%) of the respondents who indicated that they preferred the office environment.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, the results of this random poll is instructive, since it clearly suggests that this policy should neither be designed as a 'one-size-fits-all' policy, nor should it be a policy that is cast in stone.

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Conversely, it is my respectful view, that this policy should include a comprehensive manpower audit of the entire labour force of the Assembly, so as to properly evaluate the categories of workers who qualify to work from home, while at the same time ensuring that the policy is of a voluntary nature.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, a new research by the Workspace Innovation Company, Instant Group, has found that eighty percent (80%) of the work places in Germany now have a flexible workforce policy in place. The country has also earlier introduced its 'Right-to-Work-from Home Bill' aimed at encouraging more flexibility. The Netherlands is ranked second in this regard, followed by Australia, the United States of America and Canada. This data is instructive and therefore confirms that the COVID-19 pandemic has reshaped the workplace throughout the world for some time to come.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, at the level of the Central Government, I am advised that the Ministry of Planning and Development is currently

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drafting a work-from-home policy for both the Civil and Public Service. However, I wish to respectfully submit for the consideration of this Honourable Chamber, that rather than wait on the National Policy, this is an opportune time for the Administration of the Tobago House of Assembly to develop its own remote workforce policy, specifically designed to meet and treat with the peculiar challenges of the Tobago House of Assembly's work force at this time.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I am quite aware that such a policy will face various political, environmental, social, technological and legal impediments that will make its implementation quite challenging across Divisions. However, the more challenging times we face, the greater is the need for courageous, insightful, diligent and decisive leadership which should inspire hope and provide direction during unpredictable and unprecedented times like these.

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I do accept as quite reasonable, someone perhaps thinking out loud, as to why the former Administrations of the PNM (People's National Movement) did not develop such a policy before now. With your permission, please allow me an opportunity to place the situation into its rightful context.

You may recall, that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, work-from-home in the Tobago House of Assembly was being considered as part of a wider national response to concerns over loss of productivity, work life balance and workers health and wellness among other challenges at that time. However, while these consultations and considerations were happening, the deadly COVID-19 pandemic virus crept upon us all and the Tobago House of Assembly, guided by the public health policies of the Central Government was compelled to act and respond instantaneously.

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, you may also recall, that on the onset of the first wave of the infection detected in this country, the government immediately announced the closure of all places of learning including day cares, schools, universities and the subsequent implementation of *online* learning across the education curriculum.

The former Tobago House of Assembly Administration, in keeping with the Public Health Coronavirus Regulations of 2020 dated March 28, 2020, acted swiftly and responsibly by ensuring that all non-essential workers stayed at home during the peak of the first wave of infections in 2020.

Additionally, during the peak of the second wave of infections in April 2021, the Tobago Public Service workforce was reduced to fifty percent (50%) capacity as per Chief Administrator Circular Memorandum dated April 21st, 2021.

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, you may also recall the closure of the accounting units across the Assembly as staff tested positive for the virus, which in many instances, led to delays in payment of salaries and outstanding bills to service providers and contractors.

To address this challenge within the public service, the former Administration encouraged Administrators to implement remote work and flexy time on a discretionary basis and as they considered necessary, for the efficient conduct of public business. Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, it will therefore be quite irresponsible and disingenuous if any of my Colleagues were to attempt to insinuate that no actions were taken by the former Administration to facilitate employees working from home during the pandemic.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, at this time, permit me to turn my attention to the numerous benefits to be derived by the Assembly in

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developing a remote workforce policy. This remote workforce policy has great economic potential, since it can realize significant areas of cost savings for the Assembly and the worker as well, while at the same time, earn large sums of revenue for the Tobago House of Assembly.

Let me share with you, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, some of the ways that the Assembly can realize cost savings as follows:

- A work-from-home policy will significantly reduce the demand for office space and thereby reducing the Assembly's expenditure on the rental of properties to house divisions and units across the Assembly.
- A work-from-home policy will shift the operations of the Assembly from a paper-based system to a more paperless, digitized system, thereby once again reducing the amount of money spent on the procurement of stationery; and
- A work-from-home-policy, would also reduce the need to outfit - spaces with epiphany such as office desks, executive chairs

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and other office supplies thereby again reducing the
Assembly's annual expenditure on minor equipment purchases.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, employees whose category of work
qualifies them to work from home will enjoy some immediate cost savings
as well.

I take this opportunity to share the example of a friend of mine, who
works as a BOA1 at the Division of Settlements in the far West at Crown
Point. But, however, that individual has to travel on a daily basis to work
from the deep East. Mr. Presiding Officer, I am told by that officer, that
their monthly expenditure to cover transport, food and other work-related
activities, is usually upwards of two thousand, five hundred dollars
(\$2,500.00), which really represents about fifty percent (50%) of the
employee's income. However, when this same employee was allowed to
work from home during the stay-at-home ordinance, they were able to save

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almost the equivalent of that two thousand, five hundred dollars (\$2,500.00) and was able to use that savings for other purchases and other requirements.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, there are numerous examples that I can share, in how such a policy can significantly reduce the income of the Assembly, but to do so, it might just have to include an invoice to my good friend the Honourable Chief Secretary, the Member for Parlatuvier/L'Anse Fourmi/Speyside.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, on a more serious note, this policy can really generate significant revenue for the Assembly.

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Permit me to share some of the ways in which such revenue can be realized.

The investment in digitization and technology will play a critical role in the successful implementation of a work-from-home policy. Therefore, the Tobago House of Assembly must be prepared to make that initial investment in developing an island wide Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Data Connectivity Plan.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, such an investment will earn the Assembly long-term financial and productive returns. Accordingly, I am aware that the previous Administration, through the Tobago Information and Technology Limited Company (TITLC) commenced a partnership with WARWE to develop Tobago as a smart island. The development of this Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Data Connectivity platform can earn revenue for Tobago by allowing free access only to special categories of residents and charging a small fee to other users for data access and usage. This single initiative can generate significant revenue and foreign exchange for the island in any one financial year.

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, we do not have to reinvent the wheel since there are proven models that we can adopt from countries like the United States of America (USA) where broadband suppliers such as AT&T and Exfinity provide data access to customers at varying rates.

Another example, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, where we can generate serious revenue, is through tourism, tourism, tourism. It is no secret that tourism in the twenty-first (21st) century has evolved simply beyond the offering of sun, sand and sea. However, island-based destinations are now seeking to attract tourists who work and study independently from their laptops known as “Digital Nomads.” These types of tourists are known as, “Digital Nomads” and what is particularly interesting about them, is that they tend to stay in a destination for a long period of time.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, in the Caribbean, Barbados is already going after this type of business with a programme called, “Welcome Stamp” and that

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was launched last year July. Barbados is closely followed by Bermuda who also in last year of August, launched its one year work programme which allows non-Bermudans to relocate their home and office to the twenty-one (21) square mile island for research study or remote work.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, it is my belief that the development of a reliable Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Data connectivity infrastructure, coupled with the launch of a Remote Work Visa Programme will propel and position Tobago as a very attractive tourism destination for digital nomad-type tourists and so help to boost our international tourism arrivals and earn much needed foreign exchange revenue for the island of Tobago and our tourism stakeholders.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, another important benefit to be derived from an effective performance monitoring and management based work-from-home policy is improvement in productivity.

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, information obtained from the Ministry of Planning via the Central Statistical Office, has reported that during the second quarter of 2020, productivity increased by two point two percent (2.2%) over the first quarter, while the third quarter of 2020, productivity was increased by point five percent (.5%) over the second quarter.

If we can achieve such an increase in productivity without having a formal work force policy, just imagine what can be achieved in addressing our productivity challenges here in Tobago, if such a policy was to be implemented with the requisite performance management ICT and HR support systems.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, another benefit of this work-from-home policy, is that it will force the Tobago House of Assembly to develop an effective performance management and appraisal system. Currently, employees' productivity is simply measured by one's presence at work, when we all know that there are employees who show up early to work every day and do very little, and on the other hand, there are employees who may arrive to work very late, but they do quite a lot.

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, it is therefore my respectful view that such an approach of appraising employees, is quite archaic and therefore, a formal work-from-home policy will indeed accelerate the Assembly's investment in modern performance measurement software and tools that are lying stacked to measurable objectives and outcomes. This will in the first instance, ensure accountability, responsibility and also increase productivity across the Assembly.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, more than any other benefit such a policy will bring, this policy will boost the health and wellness of not just the employees, but the family as a whole. Such a policy will afford families an opportunity to better balance work life and family life, as those employees who qualify to work from home will have the opportunity to spend more quality time together with their families.

One of my pet peeves with the current structure of the Assembly, is that too many persons are straddled into the office settings, when the truth of the matter is that there are many positions in the Assembly where employees can easily work

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from home. I am sure that even our Administrators will love to know that there is a digital system that would allow *e-approvals* and *e-filing* of data which would allow them even to operate from the comfort of their homes and in the presence of family as opposed to having to go to work very early at sunrise and often times leave work very late after the sun sets.

I am sure even for the single mothers, single parents without a guardian to oversee the *online* work of their sons or daughters, that these individuals too will happily embrace the luxury of working from home and having that comfort that their child is properly cared for in their home spaces.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, allowing persons to work from home will bring a level of peace of mind for your employees and this in turn will allow them to function more effectively and efficiently as well, because often times employees would tell you that being in the office setting sometimes causes unnecessary distractions - they are distracted in many ways having to attend to other duties when, if they were in

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the comfort of their homes, they may just be allowed to perform their functions more
dutifully and diligently.

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MR. K. MORRIS (Cont'd)

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, a work-from-home policy also has the potential to create employment as well. Once the Tobago House of Assembly (THA) adopts this digitized platform and embraces the importance of having a stand-alone Information and Technology (ICT) perhaps Division or Unit, this in itself will create employment opportunities for our sons and daughters who we would have trained in areas of digitization, information technology and other related services.

Additionally, the very cost-saving benefits that will be accrued from the reduction in rental property; purchase of stationery; minor equipment; even food - because when you have meetings and you have all these employees in the workplace - in some situations, if the meeting goes over to lunch time, employees have to be fed. So all these cost-savings will allow the Tobago House of Assembly to find other areas where we can perhaps explore productive and progressive situations to employ more of our Tobagonian sons and daughters.

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MR. K. MORRIS (Cont'd)

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, as mentioned earlier, there are many hurdles that the Assembly will have to overcome in developing such a policy. As we all know, public servants are tied to terms of engagement through their collective bargaining agreements and arrangements, and therefore the Tobago House of Assembly will have to seek to get the buy-in from the various Trade Unions.

Additionally, we know that both the public service and the civil service are regulated by legislation which stipulates hours of work. So this in itself will also present a challenge and would probably perhaps require legislative intervention. But in the interim, as an Assembly and as an Administration, it is important that whatever parameters are allowed within the civil service and the public service, we pursue it to the good of ensuring that we can have a formalized workforce policy.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, notwithstanding some of these challenges identified, it is my fervent conviction that the benefits of developing a

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MR. K. MORRIS (Cont'd)

remote workforce policy to govern work from home and flexy work schedule of employees across the Divisions of the Assembly, significantly outweighs any unforeseen challenges.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, it is in this context, I again encourage this Honourable House, that we mandate the Administration to develop a remote workforce management policy to be implemented throughout all the divisions and agencies of the Tobago House of Assembly as a matter of urgency. With these concluding thoughts and position of this Motion, I do so beg to move.

Thank you.

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: *Question proposed.*

Councillor Orlando Kerr, you may join the debate.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY IN THE DIVISION OF EDUCATION,
RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY:** (Councillor Orlando Kerr) [*Desk thumping*] Good afternoon, Colleagues.

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COUNCILLOR O. KERR (Cont'd)

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I would like to begin by thanking you, the Chief Secretary, my Colleagues in the House and the people of Tobago, for giving me this opportunity to address you with my maiden contribution on such an important and relevant issue.

In any discussion on most fundamental issues, history and context are of paramount importance. It is in that regard that I will attempt to bring some history and context to this matter at hand, as we go through our discourse.

Trinidad and Tobago recorded its first case of COVID-19 on Thursday, March 12th, 2020. One of the first steps taken by the then Administration, was to close school for one week and subsequently, that closure continued indefinitely. Children were at home; teachers were at home - no clear direction on what should happen. Teachers were interacting with students on a voluntary basis. Some teachers were sending work on *WhatsApp* for those students they could reach. Many teachers felt helpless.

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The pandemic was here, and we were caught literally '*with our pants down.*'
No preparation, nothing in place. It was though we were making it up as we
go along.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, in September, 2020, voluntary interaction
with students became mandatory *online* interactions. Guidelines for *online*
interaction were sent by the Ministry of Education, TTUTA claiming that
they were not consulted - that battle between the Ministry and Trinidad and
Tobago Unified Teachers Association (TTUTA) continues even today. No
one knows exactly what to do in terms of how it had affected the terms and
condition of employment, not only of teachers, but of many other
employees. But I can say that as it relates to teachers, what is being
proposed is that there must be negotiations between the Chief Personnel
Officer (CPO) and the recognized majority Union in order for such a policy
to exist. Our system is still mainly based on face-to-face interaction.

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In September, 2021, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, we shifted from full *online*, to vaccinated fifth and sixth forms students. With the pushback from parent groups such as the MPTA and groups of concerned parents and other groups, all students were allowed to go to school. Presently, we have our lower school and standard 5 attending and the focus is to have all students out from standard 4 to infants for the new term.

There is also talk about a blended system, but the views differ on how it affects terms and conditions of employment of teachers and as was mentioned before, the need for negotiations.

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Before COVID-19, working was going to a physical place for a specific time and remaining there until such time as you finished work. As the pandemic got worse with more hospitalizations and deaths, the governments across the world begun implementing lockdowns followed by states of emergency. These measures had disastrous consequences on our economy and how people work. Because people had to stay at home, many businesses were closed and massive job loss ensued. Because we could not go to work in some instances, persons had to remain in the confines of their homes for weeks on ends.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, it affected how we socialized; the way we 'limed,' (as we say in local palance); it affected physical activity and sports. It affected all events and activities that we are used to:

- Graduations;
- Weddings;
- Funerals;
- Anniversaries and birthdays.

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We just got up one day and a whole new existence we had to get used to. So we had to change how we do things - essentially we had to change how we lived.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, on September 12th, 2020, the Public Health Ordinance Chapter 12 No.4 Regulations made by the Minister under section 105 and confirmed by the President under section 167 of the Public Health Ordinance, spoke to non-essential workers staying at home until such time as indicated, at that time, giving the previous Administration, a little over one (1) year to do what this Motion is asking us to do now. But I understand why it is being brought now.

This new Tobago House of Assembly (THA) Executive has a knack for doing things in two (2) months which the previous Administration could not do in twenty-one (21) years. [*Desk thumping*] So I understand why the Minority Leader felt that this was the best time to bring the Motion.

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Our mantra – “leh we fix dis” and we surely will fix this. So one may ask why the need for urgency now in this matter.

We have recognized that the economy is opening up – slowly we are trying to move towards a sense of normalcy, so why?

As bad as COVID-19 has been for the world with the sickness; the hospitalizations; the deaths; the loss of jobs; the loss of business; the terrible strain on the health care and its related effects on the economy, it has presented us with an opportunity.

When the pandemic hit us, we were forced to change the way we do things - how we worked; how we socialized; how we did everything - our way of life. This pandemic has forced us to accelerate the use of technology in every single area: -

- In Education;
- In Business;
- In Meetings;

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- In Workshops;
- In Seminars; and
- Even the way we socialized;
- Sports; and
- Culture.

Technology has been incorporated in every facet of our lives forever - there is no going back - the world has changed forever.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, this Administration has from the inception, given its commitment to the digitization of Tobago, to moving Tobago to a paperless society. Within two (2) months of assuming office, this Administration is set to launch the '*Smart App*' within the Division of Infrastructure, Quarries and Urban Development with many more initiatives such as this across Divisions. [*Desk thumping*] This is testimony to the commitment of this Administration to moving Tobago into that technological era and as we say, '*the proof of the pudding, is in the eating.*' This is also evident in the realignment of our Divisions, in particular, the Division of

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Education, Research and Technology where greater emphasis would be placed on the development and the application of technology in the Tobago space.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, there was a time in Tobago where schools were almost afraid for children to use the technology. The use of cellphones were banned in schools - there was no internet access on the school compounds. We have already begun to address those issues, but we have embraced the use of technology across our education system and we are embracing the use of technology across our Divisions in the Tobago House of Assembly (THA). If you look at the contrast of what is happening now, we have pre-school children *on line* and they can even demonstrate to their parents, the use of technology. The world has become a global village and if you are not on board, you will get left behind. We certainly do not want to get left behind in Tobago.

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COUNCILLOR O. KERR (Cont'd)

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, the development of a remote workforce management policy is critical to the digitization process. This Administration has no choice based on our plans for the development of Tobago, to develop such a policy and therefore, this Motion was not necessary.

After a year of doing nothing in this regard, I fail to see how it has become a high priority on the 'to do list' of the previous Administration. We are committed to fixing Tobago for Tobagonians and that we will do. We are aware that many Administrators within the divisions would have adopted various strategies to mitigate against the impact of COVID-19, such as shift systems and rotations, but we are of the firm view that a policy document is needed.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, in the absence of such a policy, the chaos which resulted from a lack of policy direction from the government will continue to take place. Industrial relations between employer and employee will continue to be poor. There must be clear guidelines for non-essential

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employees to make their contribution while minimizing the risk to their safety.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, this policy must also ensure maximum productivity from those persons who may fall under such category. It must be flexible; it must cater to those common circumstances that may arise and how they should be treated. This policy must be a Tobago House of Assembly (THA) wide policy which must be spread across all Divisions. It must be standardized, clear and relevant to specific situations that may arise from time to time. We are of the view that a remote workforce policy is absolutely critical to the transformation of this island.

As was said by my Chief Secretary on so many occasions - Tobago has the potential to be the greatest little island on the planet and therefore, in order for us to accomplish that, we must embrace digitization and technology.

I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, in accordance with Standing Order 41, I beg to move that the Motion be amended by inserting these words:

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“**AND WHEREAS**, the immediate past Executive Council of the
Tobago House of Assembly neglected its responsibility to design and
implement a formal remote workforce management policy.”

Those words to be there inserted or added after the second ‘**AND
WHEREAS**’ paragraph.’

And by inserting “support” at the first **BE IT RESOLVED**, that is,
“this House supports.” And by inserting or adding those words:

“**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that this House supports all efforts
of the Executive Council to digitize and modernize the operations of
the Tobago House of Assembly.”

Those words there to be inserted or added at the “**BE IT RESOLVED**”
paragraph.

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MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: Is there a seconder for the amendments?

HON. Z. HACKETT: Mr. Deputy Presiding Officer, I beg to support the proposed amendments.

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: Honourable Members, the question is, that the Motion be amended by inserting those words:

“**AND WHEREAS** the immediate past Executive Council of the Tobago House of Assembly neglected its responsibility to design and implement a formal remote workforce management policy.”

- those words be there inserted or added after the second “**AND WHEREAS...**” paragraph, and by inserting the word ‘supports’ at the first “**BE IT RESOLVED...**” that is ‘this House supports...,’ and by inserting or adding those words:

“**BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED** that this House supports all efforts of the Executive Council to digitize and modernize the operations of the Tobago House of Assembly.”

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Those words be there inserted or added after the “**BE IT RESOLVED ...**”
paragraph.

Members taking part in the debate hereafter, may speak on the
original motion and the proposed amendments.

Member for Buccoo/Mt. Pleasant, you may join the debate.

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF HEALTH, WELLNESS AND SOCIAL
PROTECTION** (Mr. Sonny Craig) [*Desk thumping*]: Mr. Dep. Presiding
Officer, a pleasant good evening to everyone in this august body here at the
Chamber. I am humbled to be standing here to address this distinguished
House in this hallowed Chamber with so much historical value attached to it.

It is no secret that this debate is a very important one, and the views
expressed here would go a long way in shaping the future of the island and
this is the purpose for which we have all gathered in this House.

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MR. S. CRAIG (Cont'd)

The original Motion, as presented today by the Member for Darrel Spring/Whim, sort to present to this House a commendable projection in principle, but one cannot escape the fact that it comes at a time when this Administration has already hit the ground running in getting Tobago's business fixed. We cannot in good conscience have a plausible exchange of ideas without paying close attention to opportunities lost along the way on this journey, that have been paved by the entrance of the COVID-19 pandemic on the world.

I am blessed and we are blessed to work along with the distinguished Dr. Faith B.Yisrael, who at present is our esteemed Secretary of Health, Wellness and Social Protection. And being a member of the team that leads in the health care arena for Tobago, I have been able to witness first-hand, the results of blatant neglect in this area in this Division, in this Tobago House of Assembly. It goes without saying that implementation of a policy

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is not necessarily a 'now for now' kind of result. We must understand that all the variables involved in the process surrounding the issue, have to be carefully thought out, and sometimes by trial and error, we arrive at a point where a policy is formulated, and this would concrete our course of action and set a governance model that we could work with.

COVID-19 brought with it so many uncertainties and so many unknown variables, that its treatment and our ability to chart a course was sometimes uncertain. However, there were certainties that presented themselves as early as May 2020, which were not addressed. One such certainty, was the need for a parallel health care system, and due to the highly infectious nature of this disease, parallel health care systems were the order of the day in developed and developing societies. Even as close as our neighbour Trinidad, a parallel health care system was implemented. However, right here in Tobago, this idea was totally neglected.

[Interruption]

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MINORITY LEADER: Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, 45 (1) irrelevant...

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: Member for Darrel
Spring/Whim, you will have the opportunity to raise this, when you wrap up
the debate.

Continue Member for Buccoo/Mt. Pleasant.

MR. S. CRAIG: Thank you, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer.

Due to the highly infectious nature of this disease, parallel health care systems were set up, so in Tobago this was not the case. As a consequence, we saw where our health care system was challenged tremendously at our major facility, the Scarborough General Hospital, where clinics were cancelled and infected persons and persons suspected of the infection were mingling in similar environments.

Now, since our assumption of duty led by Dr. Faith B. Yisrael, we have been able to restore and develop a parallel health care system and it is evident in the numbers that are being recorded daily as far as the pandemic is concerned. We are down to single digits, sometimes no death, sometimes

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one death daily, over the last month. I am raising this to show where as we have gone through this time of uncertainty, many opportunities went amidst by the previous Administration.

The Roxborough Hospital, a facility that was hurriedly opened in December of 2020, not necessarily as a hospital, but as a 'vote-bank' with the hope of creating a destabilizing effect on the political aspirations of our members in the East. We see that now under the leadership of Dr. Faith B.Yisrael and this Administration, we are eventually finishing that facility and soon it would be in use to serve the people in the rural areas of Tobago and in due course, that area would not be termed 'rural' anymore, for the development of the country is well afoot.

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Now my point, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, is that any Motion that seeks to rush this Administration, any Motion that seeks to create a sense of urgency with regards to Tobago's development must be met with justifiable skepticism as the former Administration stands guilty of seeking to create the illusion that they are concerned about the direction in which Tobago is heading and that we need to move with haste in implementing strategies that they stand guilty of having multiple opportunities so to do, and not working expeditiously at executing.

It is all well and good for the Honourable Representative for Darrel Spring/Whim and he will like us to embrace this Motion as presented. However, the variables that need to be considered transcend the simplicity of this Motion.

Has an impact assessment been done on the different expressions of remote employment? What is the impact? When persons decide to stay at home or in their gardens or in their places of comfort to work from their

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devices, should they suffer any injury, should they suffer any incident or accident, is there any provision for them to be compensated should anything happen while this is in train?

Does a Safety Officer need to inspect the conditions under which employees function? If there are injuries, is there anything within the bargaining unit to protect these workers?

Although the pandemic has left us literally no option in some cases, but to work remotely in some scenarios, and yes, we do have the technology and technological support to justify this approach, it would be wise for this Administration to work cautiously while building out a policy to govern this option in the productivity scheme.

It has been proven by research in some of the first world countries, that persons who work from home, have been suffering from some ailments, such as musculoskeletal pains, eye strain and mental health. Some people need to be monitored to work effectively. And these challenges have been

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brought about because without a structured approach to time management, workers are being found to do extreme things just to get and to meet deadlines.

Recently, one of the richest men in the world predicted that another pandemic is on the way. His predictions are inconsequential actually in this conversation. The fact remains that productivity is important, results are important and regardless of what the scenario is on the world stage, people must work for momentum to be maintained. However, the pace of implementation will be determined based on real considerations of all the variables and not on any ulterior motive driven by voices that missed out on their opportunity to implement these said ideas. They had the opportunity so to do and neglected to do it.

So, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, we recommend strongly that the amended version of this Motion be considered. We are in this House for the

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benefit of all the people of Tobago and we intend to conscientiously,
intelligently and prayerfully realize our mandate to the people of Tobago.

I thank you for your gracious indulgence. Here is my contribution.

Thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: *Minority Councillor, you may join
the debate.*

MRS. PETAL DANIEL-BENOIT (Minority Councillor): Thank you, Mr.
Dep. Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to join in the debate piloted by the
Minority Leader in support of the development of a remote workforce
management policy to be implemented throughout all divisions and agencies
of the Tobago House of Assembly as a matter of urgency.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, permit me also to express my sincere
gratitude to the Minority Leader and Area Representative for Darrel
Spring/Whim, Assemblyman Kelvon Morris for the opportunity to serve
alongside him as Minority Councillor.

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MRS. P. DANIEL-BENOIT (Cont'd)

I also wish to express my deep appreciation to the People's National Movement for the confidence reposed in me to serve in this capacity, as well as all the persons who have called, messaged, sent prayers, advice and supported me in this journey thus far - my sincere appreciation.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I stand in support of the original Motion as we are in unprecedented times and unprecedented times require unprecedented and out of the box solutions.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, in my contribution to this debate, I will focus on the following:

- The benefits and opportunities of a remote workforce management policy;
- The areas that should be considered in the implementation of this policy;
- Steps taken by the Central Government and the Tobago House of Assembly to advance this initiative after which I will conclude.

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MRS. P. DANIEL-BENOIT (Cont'd)

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, before going into the meat of my presentation, I will like to address some of the concerns raised by speakers prior.

The Member for Buccoo/Mt. Pleasant indicated that such a policy as we are proposing today, is not a 'now for now' kind of solution that is required to execute this policy and as such, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, it is in this vein that I wish to refute the statement and the amended section of the Motion which indicates that the previous Administration neglected its responsibility to advance such a policy.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, the previous Administration would have implemented and would have encouraged and made arrangements for flexible working arrangements to all workers to facilitate work from home for employees of the Assembly.

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MRS. P. DANIEL-BENOIT (Cont'd)

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I want to draw the attention of this House
to the Chief Administrator's circular memorandum No.15 of 2021 dated April
21st, 2021 which was captioned – "Reduction in the Public Service by 50%."

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, this circular, inter-alia, allowed for the rotation of staff, as well as it allowed for heads of departments to give the opportunity for their members of staff for flexible working hours.

It says:

“Staff must be informed, that Regulations 62 and 63 of the Civil Service Regulation, gives heads of departments the right to vary actual hours of arrival and departure” -

and heads of department here means the Chief Administrator and other Administrators.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, because we understand that the policy - there are several considerations and this cannot happen overnight or in a short time, because there are several things that needed to be put in place to enforce such a policy - certain measures were implemented to facilitate flexible working arrangements for all employees across the Tobago House

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of Assembly.

As such, Mr. Deputy Presiding Officer, to indicate that the past Administration neglected its responsibility, it is quite untrue and we want to debunk that statement, Dep. Presiding Officer. [*Desk thumping*]

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, as I continue with my discourse, I recall that in 2019, the world looked on as China, (and to be exact) the city of Wuhan battled the deadly coronavirus. In mere months, this disease then quickly spread to over two hundred (200) countries worldwide. And as Trinbagonians, we often feel that 'God is a Trini' and as such our Twin Island Republic will not be made to suffer some of the devastation faced by many other countries.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, in this instance, Trinidad and Tobago did not remain untouched and in March 2020, the country reported its first case of the virus. By this time a worldwide pandemic was before us. Notwithstanding the valiant efforts of the Government, the Ministry of

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Health, as well as the Tobago House of Assembly, to limit the community spread of this unforeseen killer, it was eventually detected. And as the fight to combat the spread of the deadly miscreant ensued, this resulted in public health restrictions which included the closure of schools and the suspension of non-essential services, both in the private and public sectors.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, the country held its breath as we tuned in daily to view the press conferences hosted by the Ministry of Health and immediately we were required to adapt and to adjust to the 'new normal' and a new way of life.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, as a mother of two (2) young boys, the closure of schools, day care centre and the restriction of movement provided an increased challenge to our family. Instantly, I was required to juggle and manage various roles all at the same time: parent; teacher; essential worker; wife and homemaker. Some days managing the multiple roles became quite overwhelming and emotional. Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, sometimes as

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parents, we were both deemed essential and were required to be at work, so our children are at home trying to navigate the *online* school with grandparents; you are distracted at work since there's a need to check in with them regularly and at times even being excused from the office to rush home to attend to issues that may have arisen. This Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, was indeed a very taxing physically, emotionally and mentally period and experience for me, and I am sure, for many other individuals.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, in looking back, I must admit, that the days I worked from home were significantly less stressful and it allowed me to supervise my children while performing professional duties as required. I would even hasten to say, that it is my view that the office called on me a lot more on the days that I worked from home, when compared to me being physically present in the workplace. Therefore, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I have seen firsthand, the benefits [*Pause*] as an employee working from home, derived.

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Mr. Deputy Presiding Officer, there were lower stress levels, improved mental health and work/life balance, as well as greater job satisfaction.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, as an employer, the implementation of the remote workforce management policy provides the Assembly with a larger talent pool of experts that can be engaged. There may be instances where specialists and experts required are not available in Trinidad and Tobago and this policy gives the Tobago House of Assembly, the opportunity and the ability to engage and employ persons from all over the world and choose the very best without having to physically relocate them, since remote work can be done virtually anywhere.

Outside of the benefits outlined above and those expressed by the Minority Leader as he piloted this motion, globally there is a shift in the workplace. A number of organizations are transitioning to or adapting to hybrid work and some organizations are even fully embracing remote work.

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In 2021, McKinsey, a world-renowned Management and Strategy Consultant Firm, conducted a survey of one hundred (100) executives across industries and countries, and reported that nine (9) out of ten (10) countries are switching to a hybrid work model. The survey also confirmed that productivity and customer satisfaction increased during the pandemic.

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, as entities inclusive of the Tobago House of Assembly transition to remote and flexible working, there are opportunities for significant positive shifts in organizational culture, changes to rules, regulations and in some instances, changes to laws.

There are a number of areas which should be considered in the implementation of this remote workforce management policy which the Minority Leader identified in his presentation. Notwithstanding, I would also highlight a few that may impact the implementation of this policy.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, this list is by no means an exhaustive one. Existing rules that would have been mentioned before, regulations and laws may require review to determine which applies and which can be followed.

There may be a need to even amend existing legal and regulatory frameworks to allow for remote work. Workers or employees may require re-skilling and retooling as new processes and technologies are introduced.

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, we need to consider how confidentiality concerns are addressed when accessing official information from home. What are the equipment requirements for digitization to facilitate accessibility and business continuity even in the event of connectivity failures.

Remote employees need the right technology and software to fulfill their individual duties from home, but also to collaborate with co-workers, communicate with supervisors and generally feel a part of the team.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, is there a financial responsibility on the part of the Assembly for setting up home offices, consumable and telecommunications need to allow for work from home? What are the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and Information Technology (IT) infrastructure requirements, as well as what are the OSHA (Occupational Safety Health Agency) requirements when working from home? Additionally, what are the views of stakeholders inclusive of the Trade Unions?

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, as I would have indicated before, these are all considerations that must be addressed as we implement the remote workforce management policy.

I will now turn to steps taken by the Central Government and the Tobago House of Assembly to advance this 'work-from-home' initiative.

Earlier in his presentation, the Minority Leader indicated that the Government is in the process of rolling out a 'work-from-home' policy and there are some inputs that I humbly believe can be of benefit and can assist the Assembly in the implementation of the formal workforce remote management policy proposed.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, a sub-committee of the Board of Permanent Secretaries and Heads of Departments in the Civil Service was established to develop the 'work-from-home' initiative. This team conducted research and prepared a brief on work-from-home best practices. Additionally, a survey was conducted from a sample of public officers to ascertain their experiences

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with working from home and to solicit their opinion on a 'work-from-home'
policy in the Public Service.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, ten (10) Ministries, Departments and
Agencies inclusive of the Tobago House of Assembly, participated in this
survey developed under the guidance of the Central Statistical Office (C.S.O).

From the ten MDAs involved in the survey, one thousand and sixty-
eight (1,068) responses were received. Eight-two percent (82%) or eight
hundred and fifty-three (853) respondents indicated that they were able to
work from home during the pandemic. Some respondents were not able to
work from home for varying reasons namely, due to the lack of digital record
and lack of remote access of two official databases.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I believe that we do not have to reinvent
the wheel, rather, the Assembly can use existing information available to
assist in the establishment of the remote workforce management policy.

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Dep. Presiding Officer, there is a great opportunity for digital transformation as we implement this policy in the public sector. And in the Tobago context, some stripes have been made to digitize and automate the financial management in the Tobago House of Assembly.

Under the former Administration, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, the Assembly was included in a pilot project to support public financial management modernization and the implementation of an integrated financial management system.

As you may be aware, currently the Assembly manages its allocation of over two billion dollars (\$2b) via a single entry manual accounting system. The implementation of an integrated financial management information system will provide an automated, integrated solution to managing the finances of the Assembly. It would support budgetary planning, recording of payments, collection of revenue and will allow for backup and recovery of

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data as well as improved accuracy, real time access to information and
facilitate timely decision-making.

It will also facilitate double entry accounting and will allow the full
adoption of International Public Sector Accounting Standards (IPSAS)
accrual basis.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, permit me to advise this Honourable House
that advances have been made and the software was purchased. User
acceptance testing was completed, several training sessions were held with
users which cover various modules of it, such as budget planning and
appropriation, purchasing and expenditure management, procurement,
general leisure, revenue and treasury management.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, upon completion and with full rollout of
this project, the entire budget cycle will be automated and integrated across
the divisions of the Assembly. This project will allow the relevant personnel

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to access information remotely and will therefore assist the Assembly in its efforts to implement this remote workforce management policy.

Mr. Deputy Presiding Officer, as I conclude, the platform has been laid for this Administration to build upon. The Tobago House of Assembly is a dynamic, multi-faceted entity and the broad brush or 'one-size-fits all' approach is not recommended in the formulation of this policy.

As a responsible Minority, we will put forward measures that in our opinion, contribute to the development and advancement of the people of Tobago. We will also support the initiatives of the majority that are in the best interest of the island.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, it is in this context that I stand in support of this Motion and I trust that Members on the Majority side will also support it, as there is a need to respond appropriately to changing times, circumstances and situations.

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Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I thank you for the opportunity to
contribute.

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MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: *Leader of Assembly Business,*
you may join the debate.

**LEADER OF ASSEMBLY BUSINESS AND SECRETARY OF
EDUCATION, TECHNOLOGY AND RESEARCH** (Hon. Zorisha
Hackett): Thank you, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, for the opportunity to also
contribute to this debate in what is also my maiden contribution in this
Honourable House.

I wish to first express my sincerest gratitude to the electoral district of
Bethesda/Les Coteaux, for affording me the opportunity to represent their
collective voices and aspirations as their Area Representative.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, as we are all aware, just a little over a
year ago, a six/six deadlock of which I was a part, disallowed us the
esteemed privilege of bringing matters of urgent need and importance to
this august Chamber. Now here we are - fifteen (15) Assemblymen and four
(4) appointed Councillors, who have sworn or affirmed to bear true faith and
allegiance to this country, to uphold the Constitution and the law and to

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conscientiously, impartially and to the best of our knowledge, judgment and ability, discharge the functions of our offices, oaths and affirmations we should all take seriously.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, the Motion as brought by the Minority Leader is, might I dare say, a valuable one. But like my Colleagues on this side, let me hasten to add my disappointment, in the fact that though we have been navigating this pandemic for almost two (2) years, your Colleagues who sat at the helm during this crucial time, did not see it fit to treat with this policy as a matter of urgency, via the Executive Council which through Act 40 of 1996, is responsible for carrying out the functions of the Assembly. We did not even have to be bringing a Motion in the House today.

Every country across the globe, including our Caribbean neighbours faced the same challenges as Tobago. The Minority Leader spoke to

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Barbados' 'welcome stamp' visa. They launched that programme in July 2020. Imagine that! And today, the Minority Council brings excuses for why in over a year, the previous Administration could not come up with a proper and coherent remote work policy. These lethargic claims of various attempts of an introduction of the policy by his Colleagues, is endemic of their lack of political will, the shortcoming which has caused right-thinking Tobagonians to replace them with a team that will, by no doubt, finally get the job done.

During the COVID-19 pandemic this country, like many others across the globe, enacted stay-at-home policies to prevent the spread of the virus. Although these have been lifted to some degree as we attempt to return to a place of normalcy, we must still make a decision on which categories of workers in our space can continue to work from home and as we agree, build on a policy for our remote workforce.

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Although many may question why support a Motion that a previous Administration did not hold as priority during their tenure, this Administration has chosen to demonstrate true leadership by anticipating what may happen in the future. Because, even though the world is gradually opening up, as several pronouncements by our very own Prime Minister indicates, in the case of any future crises of epic proportions, this policy document will ensure that we are prepared. Before any such policy is enacted however, it would be instructive to review the many benefits of working from home, as the recent lockdown measures were brought to the fore. These include:

- Increased productivity and efficiency as employees are less distracted and less stressed;
- Remote workers also experience less challenges related to commuting to work and this also boosts their morale;

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- A well-enacted remote workforce policy can also mean less overhead and operating costs to keep businesses operations running smoothly.

Then of course, downsides to remote working that must be factored into the policy development process. Opportunities for misuse and corruption must be anticipated and planned for, with a focus on overall efficiency.

Permit me to share with this Honourable House, two (2) key considerations that must be undertaken to implement an effective policy.

Firstly, policy development and implementation must be data and evidence driven and honest feedback from Administrators, managers and supervisors within this THA is absolutely vital for the effective rollout of any policy. Sufficient time has passed for there to have been an accumulation of evidence to inform the working policy. What has been the level of productivity among non-essential workers over the past year? How

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have levels of efficiency increased over that period? These are the questions that must be asked and answered.

Secondly, the importance of digitization to modernize efficiencies in the public sector, which would in turn contribute to higher levels of transparency and accountability to citizens who depend on government services. Stein 2019 advises us that accountability is the aspect of administrative responsibility, through which officials are held answerable for general notions of democracy and morality, as well as for specific legal mandates.

He further explains, that transparency means that citizens have an inherent right to know the truth about public issues and that the government should ensure that this right is met. This therefore means that the corruption, nepotism, cronyism and fiscal mismanagement of the previous Administration will be no more. We therefore welcome this move towards

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digitization, which would see a decrease in the processing time of wages, gratuity, increment arrears and the like.

At this juncture, I wish to make it known that this current Executive, has already been introducing elements of a potential policy as the Executive Council held for the last month by us, has been conducted virtually. It will also therefore become the collective commitment of this Administration, to provide guidance for implementing improved communication programmes, setting clear expectations and providing explicit guidelines for operations as we develop and implement this remote workforce management policy through the Tobago House of Assembly's Executive Council and throughout the Tobago House of Assembly at large.

Minority Council, it is an excuse being given by both Minority Members that the previous Administration would have attempted. The Executive Council gives all right to take these attempts all the way to policy. And so, bringing a Motion today - your very first Motion – commendable –

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but the Motion should have come from this side because we were on the
outside looking on, at that lack of political will and now we are here to do
something about it.

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We are therefore going to support only the amended version of this Motion
and I thank you for the opportunity to bring our views to this august Chamber.

[Desk thumping]

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: *Minority Leader, you may wind
up the debate.*

MINORITY LEADER (Mr. K. Morris): Thank you, Mr. Dep. Presiding
Officer.

Let me congratulate my Colleague, the Minority Councillor, Mrs. Petal
Daniel-Benoit and also commendations to those on the other side, who
contributed in this most important debate.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, today, the people of Tobago got an
opportunity to see contributions from the Minority side and contributions
from the Majority side. This Motion many would admit, is a less than
contentious one. In fact, all the contributors agreed that we indeed require a
formal remote workforce policy and I stress on the word 'formal,' because

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from the evidence and the admittance from even those on the other side, they admitted that there were already policies and active positions that enabled persons to work from home. In fact, I went through length to show this Honourable House how the previous Administration would have facilitated persons working from home and even to this day, the Tobago House of Assembly is allowing persons to work from home.

What this policy is calling for, is for us to formalize the arrangement and have it as a wide-based policy across all Divisions. However, you recognize the Majority took this opportunity to come into this House and grandstand - they came into this House with arrogance; they came into this House - and I must say that I am quite disappointed because the people of Tobago would have given you a mandate to come in and govern with humility, but yet we saw the arrogance and we saw an Administration that is no longer focused on their mantra – “leh we fix dis,” but instead really focused on “leh we blame it.” And this cannot be what Tobagonians voted for. I am sure

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there are many Tobagonians already very disappointed, including those
Community Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme
(CEPEP) workers who for two (2) months running - first time unprecedented
two - the very people who depend on you. You say you come to treat with
'bread and butter issues,' and the bread and butter people are the ones
suffering right now. Yet you come into this House in a most noble Motion,
in a Motion where we all can agree that let us treat with the issue of workforce
policy to blame it, and that my brothers and sisters, that my Colleagues, is
very disappointing.

Like the President would have implored all of us, we are here to do the
bidding of the people of Tobago and this side of the Minority, we have already
both in words and in actions, shown that we are not here to play the petty
politics of old. We are here to serve Tobagonians who require people to treat
with their needs. We are not here about social media likes and fanciful

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pictures, glossed all over the place. This Minority is about serious development for the people of Tobago.

In fact, I have heard you all gloating about what the past Administration did or did not do. I want to put it on public record here for the House:

I, Kelvon Morris was never part of a former Administration of this Honourable House and therefore, the legacy that would be set here by this Minority, is a legacy premised on working for the people, working with the people and staying on the ground and understanding the basic human needs of the people and this is what I would bring to the House. I am not here to play the blame game. I am not here to look in the rearview mirror. At one point I thought that is where my Colleague from Buccoo/Mt. Pleasant was, because he missed the bus. The Motion was up in Charlotteville and he was down in Canaan.

My Colleague, Councillor - very respected, respectful guy - spent a lot of time talking about the teaching experience, and teacher experience, but let

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us really take a walk down memory lane because like some of you all seem to
have amnesia.

Nobody planned for COVID-19; nobody knew that we would
experience COVID-19. In fact, it took the world almost a year to really
understand what this virus is. When we had our first case in about March,
2020 the Central Government would have swiftly closed down all schools, so
teachers were home for about two (2) terms, I recall.

And you would remember that there were a number of Public
Ordinances and Public policies that would have allowed persons basically
shut down non-essential workers from reporting to work because we had this
stay-at-home. Remember the mantra was, “wear your mask, watch your
distance and wash your hands.” That was the time we lived in - in 2020.

And then, Deputy Presiding Officer, that would have continued
upwards to about August of last year, and thereafter about January we had
elections, and we all recall the outcome of the elections and you all recall the

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circumstances upon which we were called to govern. So to come here and indicate that no actions were taken, is quite disingenuous; is quite dishonest and I must admit, it is quite concerning. [*Desk thumping*]

And more than that. This document that I have in my hand [*Indicating*] which comes from the Ministry of Planning - it is a document that was in response to questions of the Joint Select Committee on Social Services and Public Administration clearly stated that the Tobago House of Assembly which included the previous Tobago House of Assembly led by the PNM, were already engaged in a series of consultations, a series of planning with the Central Statistical Office (CSO) to treat with this most important issue of the development of a work-from-home policy for both the Public Service and the Civil Service. [*Desk thumping*]

And I can call out some the Ministries that participated:

- The Ministry of Energy and Energy Industries;
- The Ministry of Works and Transport;
- The Office of the Prime Minister;

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- The Ministry of Planning and Development;
- The Ministry of Labour;

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- The Ministry of Finance;
- The Personnel Department;
- The Ministry of Agriculture, Land and Fisheries;
- The Tobago House of Assembly; and
- The Ministry of Public Administration and Digital Transformation.

All these Ministries were in collaboration, in concert, planning and preparing a document for a work-from-home policy for all the public service.

As I indicated before, and I heard my good friend from I think it is Bethesda/Les Coteaux, would have indicated that all it requires is an Executive Council Note. My dear friend, let me implore you and let me school you in terms of how matters of this is treated.

Our august House cannot make laws and the type of legislative reformation that this kind of policy would require, will require the legal intervention of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago. So, it is therefore

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again, quite disingenuous to say that such a policy can simply be implemented overnight. And the majority side continues to contradict themselves. We had the Member for Buccoo/Mt. Pleasant saying in one breath, that this policy cannot be done overnight and in the next breath you all are trying to amend this Motion to indicate that the former Administration derelicted its duty to implement this policy. Pick your poison - which one is it?

So, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, I cannot conscionably support these amendments, in fact, because no way, there is no proof, no evidence, that the former Administration failed or neglected its responsibility, because over this entire debate, Minority Council and myself, were able to pellucidly demonstrate that the former Administration would have taken steps within its level of control, to ensure that persons within the Tobago House of Assembly, were afforded the opportunity to work from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. That is the fact. So, this amendment that the

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Majority side is trying to infuse in this Motion is quite malicious, it is disingenuous, it is frivolous and it is quite irrelevant.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, as I conclude, I maintain the implementation of a report - a remote workforce management policy is critical to successfully managing the Assembly's operations in a post COVID-19 environment.

As leaders of this island, it is imperative that insightful and decisive leadership is practised in managing this public health issue. And perhaps it is because the current Administration really do not know what to do, why they are trying to run from this urgent mandate for us to treat with the remote workforce policy.

I know all of us are green and you could ask questions, because we are here to work for Tobago. We are here to help you if you need help, but do not run from the responsibility; do not shirk your responsibility. Tobagonians gave you overwhelming support and they are looking on to see

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if you are able and if you are capable to take on that mandate and that trust that they would have reposed in you. So, blaming the People's National Movement (PNM) would only get you so far, blaming the PNM might last for six (6) months, but trust me, you see if you all keep on not paying those Community Environmental Protection and Enhancement Programme (CEPEP) people, you would not get long in this House.

As illustrated in my presentation, Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, to date, the Assembly has managed flexitime and rational work-based policies received from the Chief Personnel Officer and subsequently the Chief Administrator. However, as we return to full operations, we must put measures in place to manage and protect our workforce.

Additionally, Tobago has the opportunity to lead the way nationally, as it relates to remote working, as the nature and size of our public service gives greater room to implement, make adjustments and address any challenges that may arise with the operationalization of the policy.

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I wish to reiterate, that not only will this policy affect the level of efficiency within the Assembly, but it will also improve the ICT infrastructure and digitization of government functions and this in turn will reduce office-related expenditure.

It will also provide tourism opportunities, targeting digital nomads seeking out new locations for their remote work.

Parents with school-aged children will also benefit immensely from this policy, as they will be able to work remotely on days where these children are not physically in school, but rather engage in *online* learning, providing them with the required level of supervision and guidance.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, development of this policy will have wide-reaching benefits to our operations, our economy and social development. It will show that we are adjusting our operations to adopt to the international standards - improving our infrastructure to meet the new

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demands and we are considerate of the impact of this pandemic on our families and our employees.

Mr. Dep. Presiding Officer, as I close, I wish to leverage to my Colleagues on the other side, that we are faced with COVID-19 right now, however, if you look at global trends, global trajectory, if you look at all indications, you would realize that COVID-19 is but the tip of the iceberg. Therefore, while it would have caught us figuratively 'with our pants down,' we should not let this reoccur going forward.

It is for this reason as a Minority, wanting to see my island of Tobago lead, and as the Honourable Chief Secretary continues to remind us, 'becomes the greatest little island in the world', I am placing on record this motion for us, as a matter of urgency to develop and implement a remote workforce management policy for all Divisions and all Agencies of the Tobago House of Assembly

I thank you. [*Desk thumping*]

Request for the Executive Council to Develop
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Implemented in all Divisions/Agencies of the
Tobago House of Assembly (Cont'd)

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER: Honourable Members,
amendments were proposed to the Motion. Before the question is put to the
House, we need to vote on each amendment.

Members, the first amendment proposed, is that the Motion be
amended by inserting or adding:

“**AND WHEREAS** the immediate past Executive Council of the
Tobago House of Assembly neglected its responsibility to design and
implement a formal remote workforce management policy;

Those words be there inserted or added after the second “**AND
WHEREAS...**” paragraph

Amendment put and agreed to.

The second amendment proposed is that the Motion be amended to
insert the word, “supports” at the first “**BE IT RESOLVED...**” “that is, this
House supports...”

Amendment put and agreed to.

UNRESOLVED

Request for the Executive Council to Develop
A Remote Workforce Management Policy to be
Implemented in all Divisions/Agencies of the
Tobago House of Assembly (Cont'd)

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER (Cont'd)

The third amendment proposed, is to insert or that those words be
there inserted or added:

“BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this House supports all efforts
of the Executive Council to digitize and modernize the operations of
the Tobago House of Assembly;”

Those words be there inserted or added after the **“BE IT RESOLVED...”**
paragraph.

Amendments put and agreed to.

UNREVISED

1
2022.02.24 D.C
3.55 – 3.58 p.m.

Request for the Executive Council to Develop
a Remote Workforce Management Policy to be
Implemented in all Divisions/Agencies of the
Tobago House of Assembly (Cont'd)

MR. DEUPTY PRESIDING OFFICER: Members, I will now put the
amended Motion to the House:

“WHEREAS, according to the Public Health Ordinance Chapter 12
No.4, regulations made by the Minister under section 105 and
confirmed by the President under section 167 of the Public Health
Ordinance on September 12th, 2020, indicates that all non-essential
workers shall remain at home until such time as indicated;

AND WHEREAS, the Tobago House of Assembly has adopted
similar measures to regulate the workforce;

AND WHEREAS, the Divisions and their employees have faced
various challenges in their efforts to establish a formal policy;

AND WHEREAS, the immediate past Executive Council of the
Tobago House of Assembly neglected its responsibility to design
and implement a formal remote workforce management policy;

BE IT RESOLVED that this House supports this new
Administration’s mandate to develop a remote workforce

UNREVISED

2
2022.02.24 D.C
3.55 – 3.58 p.m.

Request for the Executive Council to Develop
a Remote Workforce Management Policy to be
Implemented in all Divisions/Agencies of the
Tobago House of Assembly (Cont'd)

MR. DEPUTY PRESIDING OFFICER (Cont'd)

management policy to be implemented throughout all the Divisions and
agencies of the Tobago House of Assembly as a matter of urgency;

AND BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that this House supports all
efforts of the Executive Council to digitize and modernize the
operations of the Tobago House of Assembly.”

Question put and agreed to.

The Motion is carried.

Leader of Assembly Business.

ADJOURNMENT

Motion made: That the House do now stand adjourned to a date to be
fixed. [Hon. Zorisha Hackett]

Question put and agreed to.

House adjourned accordingly.

Adjourned at 3.58 pm.