

Debate No. 8

Private Notice Questions - 13 May 2003

CYBERCITY COMMITTEE - COMPOSITION, TERMS OF REFERENCE, ETC

The Leader of the Opposition (Dr. N. Ramgoolam) (*By Private Notice*) asked the Prime Minister and Minister of Defence and Home Affairs and Minister of External Communications whether, in regard to the Committee on Cybercity chaired by him, he will state -

the date the Committee was set up, its composition and its terms of reference;

the functional difference between the Executive Director of the Committee and the Executive Chairman of the Business Parks of Mauritius Ltd., and

the dates of Mr S. Lutchmeenaraidoo's appointment and resignation and the reasons thereof and explain the sudden change of decision of Government with respect to his appointment as Executive Director of the Committee.

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, on 25 April 2003, Government took the decision to set up a special committee under my chairmanship to monitor and ensure the timely implementation of the Cybercity project with Mr S. Lutchmeenaraidoo as the Executive Director. The detailed terms of reference and the conditions of service of Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo as well as the composition of the Committee were being worked out. It was then realised that not only was it difficult to harmonise the functions of the Executive Director of the Committee and those of the Chief Executive Officer of the Business Parks of Mauritius Ltd., but also that the Executive Director would have no legal and administrative standing.

Government therefore decided, on 09 May 2003, to offer Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo to be the Executive Chairman of the Business Parks of Mauritius Ltd., which he did not accept. As there was no formal letter of appointment issued to Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo either for Executive Director or for Executive Chairman of the Business Parks of Mauritius Ltd., the question of his resignation does not therefore arise.

Mr Speaker, Sir, I wish to assure the House that my Ministerial Committee, the three Task Forces which operate under its aegis, as well as the Business Parks of Mauritius Ltd. are making excellent progress to implement the objective of Government of making Mauritius a Cyber island.

In fact, the Ministerial Committee will next meet on Friday 16 May to review progress.

The House may wish to note that the ICT Ministerial Committee comprises myself as Chairman and the following members -

The hon. Paul Raymond Bérenger

Deputy Prime Minister & Minister of Finance

The hon. Alan Ganoo

Minister of Public Utilities

The hon. Nandcoomar Bodha

Minister of Tourism and Leisure

The hon. Louis Steven Obeegadoo

Minister of Education & Scientific Research

The hon. Khushal Chand Khushiram

Minister of Economic Development, Financial Services and Corporate Affairs

The hon. Joe Lesjongard

Minister of Housing and Lands

The hon. Deelchand Jeeha

Minister of Information Technology and Telecommunications

The hon. Sangeet Fowdar

Minister of Training, Skills Development, Employment & Productivity

The Terms of Reference of the Ministerial Committee are as follows -

to monitor progress as regards the development of the new economy, in particular the implementation of the Cybercity Project;

to follow up and coordinate action on the strategic partnership entered between India and Mauritius regarding IT development in Mauritius, and

to monitor the utilisation of the line of credit of US\$ 100 million approved by the Indian Authorities.

The Terms of Reference of the Task Force on Cybercity and Business Parks, which is chaired by hon. Paul Bérenger, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, is to coordinate and monitor progress as regards the implementation of the Cybercity and Business Parks project;

The Terms of Reference of the Task Force on E-Government, which is chaired by hon. Jeeha, Minister of Information Technology and Telecommunications is to coordinate and monitor the implementation for the computerization programme in the public sector;

The Terms of Reference of the Task Force on E-Education and Training, which is chaired by hon. L. S. Obeegadoo, Minister of Education and Scientific Research, is to establish the School IT Programme covering the pre-primary, primary, secondary and tertiary levels and to ensure that the necessary resources, both human and technical, are made available to implement successfully the E-education and Training Programme.

I also wish to add that so far, we have had the full support of the Indian public and private sectors in our endeavour.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can I ask the Rt. hon. Prime Minister to confirm that it was he who approached Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo to take up the post?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I had called Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Is it not a fact that his appointment was publicised and announced with pomp and pageantry last week?

The Prime Minister: What was announced was the proposition that was made by Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo, what he wanted, but nothing was finalised so far.

Dr. Ramgoolam: The hon. Prime Minister said 'nothing was finalised', but can he confirm whether he was not given an office on the third floor of the new Government building and was he not given a car in his position of Executive Director of the Committee?

The Prime Minister: Yes, certain preliminary facilities were given to Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo in the hope that the whole matter was going to be finalised.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order, please! No comments.

Dr. Ramgoolam: The Rt. hon. Prime Minister confirms that he had the office and he was given the car. Can he also confirm that he had picked twelve civil servants to work as a team with him?

The Prime Minister: Yes, we had identified twelve civil servants who were going to form part of the office.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I thank the Rt. hon. Prime Minister for this. So, it was clear that his appointment had gone some way. Can he explain, therefore, why is it that afterwards he found out that there was a legal problem? Was this issue not thought of before he was given the job?

The Prime Minister: I have already replied to this in my answer.

Dr. Ramgoolam: The hon. Prime Minister offered him the job; he takes an office, he starts recruiting people, he gets a car and then only then that Government finds that there is a legal problem! I would like to know why.

The Prime Minister: It is how it happened.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can the Rt. hon. Prime Minister confirm that the offer that was made afterwards to him as Executive Chairman of the Business Parks of Mauritius Ltd had been offered to him three times and he had turned it down before?

The Prime Minister: No. It was not turned down. Discussions were going on; we had proposed certain things; he had made counter propositions. But as I said nothing was finalised so far.

Dr. Ramgoolam: What I am saying is that Mr Luchmeenaraidoo has publicly said and confirmed that he had turned down the offer of Executive Director of Business Parks of Mauritius Ltd, because he did not want to be as if a director of a private company. It was not going to fulfil the role that he was meant to do and that he turned it down three times and he was surprised that he was given the same offer again.

The Prime Minister: That was the last statement, which he made publicly.

Dr. Ramgoolam: What I want to know is whether the hon. Prime Minister can confirm that this offer that was made to him after he was removed as Executive Director of the Committee had in fact already been turned down by him before?

The Prime Minister: I have already answered that.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can he confirm that Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo has not only taken an office, but has also participated in working sessions?

The Prime Minister: No working sessions have taken place. There was only an *ad hoc* committee that was called and no business was transacted, I had to postpone.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Is the hon. Prime Minister aware that the Executive Director of the Board of Investment, Mr Comarmond, has confirmed that Mr Luchmeenaraidoo had a working lunch session with Indian investors in his capacity as Executive Director of the Committee?

The Prime Minister: I am not aware.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Will he take it up with Mr Comarmond and ask him to explain whether he had this working session or not? Because there were Indian Investors there.

The Prime Minister: To please the Leader of the Opposition I will take it up with Mr Comarmond.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I thank the hon. Prime Minister for his generous acceptance of the suggestion that this be asked, because it creates confusion even with the Indian investors. But does he not agree that it looks like a comedy of errors?

(Interruptions)

No. The Rt. hon Prime Minister approached Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo for the post. He is approached and then his appointment is announced, including on the MBC. He started getting invitations for official functions in his capacity as Executive Director of the Committee. He was there when his Excellency the President of Ghana was in Mauritius and in his capacity as Executive Director of the Committee. And then he is forced to go in dishonour, because Government has changed his mind, within one week! And he is offered a post that he had refused three times before! Does the hon. Prime Minister not think that the Government is being seen as not being very serious and that it does not know what it wants?

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order, Order, please!

The Prime Minister: It is a matter of opinion, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Does not the hon. Prime Minister think that even the authority that he has as Prime Minister is being undermined?

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

The Prime Minister: How?

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order, please!

Dr. Ramgoolam: I am sure the Rt. hon. Prime Minister does not need me to tell him what are the powers of the Prime Minister concerning his duties and responsibilities. And now he wants to know now how his authority is being undermined. He is the Prime Minister of the country; he approaches Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo to occupy a post. He offers him a job and he accepts. He is given a building, an office and a car; he puts up a team and then one week later he is told to go because ...

(Interruptions)

That is how his authority is being undermined. That is what authority is about. The Prime Minister calls somebody and offers him a job ...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Dr. Ramgoolam: You are aspiring to be Prime Minister, but the Prime Minister cannot do things like that. His authority is being undermined and probably on purpose!

The Prime Minister: If Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo decided not to accept despite all my efforts, what can I do?

Dr. Ramgoolam: He did not accept, because the Rt. hon. Prime Minister knows, he felt that he was being humiliated.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Dr. Ramgoolam: The hon. Prime Minister knows that he was being humiliated after having given him the post, having refused the other post, and then he told him: "take this or leave". That is why he was being humiliated. But can the hon. Prime Minister say what is exactly the motivation of the Government for that U-turn?

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, I thought the hon. Leader of the Opposition would be more interested with the Cybercity project than with Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Order!

Dr. Ramgoolam: I will come to that. Can he say whether there has been pressure from Ministers to reverse the very decision they approved one week prior to that?

The Prime Minister: Who has suggested that there has been pressure? I have never said that!

Dr. Ramgoolam: I do not say that you said that, but I am asking whether there was pressure, that some Ministers felt that they were being belittled and that it was a glaring indictment of their incompetence and that is why you needed Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo. That is my question.

The Prime Minister: I did not feel anything of that sort!

Dr. Ramgoolam: It is not whether the Prime Minister felt or not.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Silence, please!

Dr. Ramgoolam: Is this therefore not another example of a recurring habit it seems, of the Government, of taking a decision and then reversing it, as if shoot first and then ask questions!

The Prime Minister: It is better to take decisions than not to take at all!

Dr. Ramgoolam: It is better to take a proper decision than instead of rushing and then back track! This is a recurring habit of the Government, for it is not the first time. We can give many examples of Government shooting first and then asking questions, like a cowboy!

(Interruptions)

We are talking of the national interest. Can I ask him whether he really, honestly and sincerely thinks that he is giving the right signal with such a petty, partisan and rancorous what-has-happened attitude to such a vital sector?

The Prime Minister: I cannot answer that!

Dr. Ramgoolam: Does he not agree that the Cybercity project at this point - he has himself said "this is why we want these people there" looks rudderless without leadership and that essentially we need a *patron de l'informatique* or a driver?

The Prime Minister: I do not know what it is alleged I have said. I should like to know from the hon. Member.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I will tell what the hon. Prime Minister himself said just now.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Dr. Ramgoolam: Let me repeat. Just now the Prime Minister said that there are many task forces and committees. There is a committee chaired by the Rt hon. Prime Minister himself. There is the Business Parks of Mauritius Ltd. There are also now different task forces chaired by different Ministers - Minister Jeeha, the Minister of Education, Mr Obeegadoo, the Minister responsible for IT and there is also - from what I heard - a long list of people who are sitting on those committees. There is also a sub-committee chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. There are also the Board of Investment, the Financial Services Promotion Authority, Ministerial Committees. Does he not think that he needs somebody - that it is a question of too much overlap, too many cooks spoiling the broth - I think the decision was good. We agreed with that decision and we said it. I do not know whether it was reported or not. I told Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo that it is a good thing in the national interest that there is a driver who can overlook and do this.

The Prime Minister: I do not know how one can come to the conclusion that the broth is spoiled. I do not see it.

Dr. Ramgoolam: There are too many people doing too many things, and they are probably doing the same things, then, fighting with each other. This is how we ended up with this ridiculous situation of Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo being appointed one week and was asked to resign the next week. Doesn't the Rt. hon. Prime Minister think that it is high time to end this chaos and have somebody who can give clear objectives and a strategic vision in such a vital sector?

The Prime Minister: I have said that there was no appointment and no dismissal or resignation.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I am not talking about the appointment. Doesn't the Prime Minister think it is time that this chaos, this overlap, this repetition and infighting of the big egos and the smaller egos should end, that we should have somebody who can act as an Executive Director to articulate clearly - ...

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Silence, please!

Dr. Ramgoolam: ...the Rt. hon. Prime Minister said it is a vital sector, which we agree - what is the strategic orientation, to see where is our comparative advantage and to start it?

The Prime Minister: All this has been included in my answer.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Doesn't the Rt. hon. Prime Minister think that there are too many committees and too many people chairing too many committees that we do not need?

(Interruptions)

Why was it then that Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo was appointed in the first place?

The Prime Minister: Everybody knows that Mr Dev Manraj was there; he has gone. Therefore, we had to look for somebody else. It is so simple.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Clearly, therefore, Government needed somebody to overlook.

The Prime Minister: I have said that.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Why did the Rt. hon. Prime Minister offer him and then remove the offer? That is the question!

(Interruptions)

The Rt. hon. Prime Minister said that he approached him for the job.

The Prime Minister: I approached him and we made him an offer. He made counter-offers, we did not accept, and he did not accept our offer.

(Interruptions)

Dr. Ramgoolam: That is not the case! The answer did not say this. He had already refused the counter-offers that Government made. Government had accepted to appoint him. Cabinet had discussed it, and it was announced on television. He was given an office, a car and a team. This is what I am saying. This is again an example of taking a decision and then reversing it.

(Interruptions)

These are examples! They can do their propaganda, but this is the fact and an area where we have a pillar of the economy that needs leadership and vision and we do not have it at the moment.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

The Prime Minister: I have said discussions were still on.

Dr. Ramgoolam: I did not quite understand the Prime Minister when he said that discussions are still on. Are discussions still on Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo?

The Prime Minister: I said 'were still on' before he left.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can we expect, therefore, a viable business proposition plan that looks at our comparative advantages so as to attract new businesses in the IT instead of what we are doing now, getting civil servants and private sector businessmen to go and do business there?

The Prime Minister: Well, we will do our best.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Does the Rt. hon. Prime Minister not think that, in the light of such institutional confusion and pandemonium ...

(Interruptions)

There are examples! Instead of doing propaganda, they should look what is happening on their side in a vital sector!

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: No comments!

Dr. Ramgoolam: The communist propaganda does not hold. They should look what they are doing with the country. They are destroying the country and destroying a vital sector of the economy. That is what they are doing. At best it is going to be a glorified business park with no value added or else it is going to be purely and simply a white elephant. Does not the Prime Minister agree with that?

The Prime Minister: We will wait and see.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can the Prime Minister confirm that, with all these committees, task forces and Ministers chairing committees, a detailed study has just been commenced to ascertain our strengths and weaknesses in that sector?

The Prime Minister: That is not correct, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Ramgoolam: We will check, but our information is that this is correct. Can the Prime Minister say how many new jobs have been created in the IT sector?

The Prime Minister: I do not have the figures, but I know that already, not in the cybercity, but elsewhere, call centres have been opened, many businessmen are coming and they are interested. But if a specific question is asked, and notice is given, I will give the figure.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: No comments!

Dr. Ramgoolam: I am asking that question because in November 2000, the Rt. hon. Prime Minister himself said that he strongly believed that if effective measures are taken, 20,000 jobs will be created in that area, which we had already said before.

(Interruptions)

They should go and read our manifesto, and they will see! The Prime Minister is following what we were doing. He is saying what we had said. There is no problem. We want to encourage the Prime Minister to say it. But one year later, in May 2003, Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo comes along and says that 20,000 jobs will be created in five years' time. Every time they are saying that they are going to create 20,000 jobs in five years' time. That is why I am asking how many jobs have been created in that sector? Therefore, are we now selling dreams to the people? Because every year we are saying that 20,000 jobs will be created in five years' time. Does not the Prime Minister think that they are misleading the people?

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order! Hon. Baloomoody!

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, Sir, in fact, we still maintain that after the implementation of the project, in five years' time, there will be 20,000 jobs created, even more.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can he say how many foreign workers are working on the cybercity site?

The Prime Minister: I do not have the list with me, Mr Speaker, Sir.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can he say why contracts for air conditioning for the value of Rs 130 m. have been given to a foreign company and not to a local company?

The Prime Minister: That has nothing to do with the question.

Dr. Ramgoolam: Can I remind the Rt. hon. Prime Minister that, when the contract was given in the first place, there was confusion and there had to be a retender exercise? Can I remind him that there was confusion when there was going to be the laying of the foundation stone? An Indian Minister was invited, he accepted the invitation, and at the last minute, it had to be cancelled. Now, on the Committee, there is again confusion and wrong signal. Mr Lutchmeenaraidoo is appointed. This is announced and then he is asked to leave because the appointment is cancelled. Does he not agree that this looks not like 'information communication technology' but rather like 'institutional confusion technology'?

The Prime Minister: I do not agree with that, Mr Speaker, Sir.

(Interruptions)

Mr Speaker: Order!

Dr. Ramgoolam: Does not the Prime Minister agree that this creates a lot of confusion in a vital sector of the economy?

The Prime Minister: I said that I do not agree with that.

Mr Speaker: Next item, please.