

SECOND READING OF THE STATE LANDS (AMENDMENT) BILL

**Mr. Speaker, Sir,**

I beg to move that the State Lands (Amendment) Bill be read a second time.

This is the first Bill that I have the privilege and pleasure of introducing into this august National Assembly since I assumed office as Minister of Housing and Lands.

Privilege and pleasure, because I form part of a Government of “*Changement*” which, in its “Programme Gouvernemental de l’Alliance Sociale”, mandated by the *vox populi*, stated clearly that the evolutionary measures aimed at “*améliorer le bien-être*” include such measures as:-

- (a) « *Assurer le planning de mise à disposition des terres ....* »
- (b) « *Eradiquer les barrières juridiques et sociales qui sont autant des barrières à l'accès équitable à la propriété de la terre* » ; and
- (c) « *Rationaliser et harmoniser l'ensemble de la législation sur la terre et l'accès à la propriété de la terre* ».

Privileged and pleased, Mr. Speaker, Sir, also because this Bill demonstrates continuity in the philosophy of the Government of “Changement” which indeed continues to honour its engagements to democratise the economy, to put people first, and to empower them. These are not empty slogans, but real and ongoing commitments.

It is public knowledge that when this Government assumed office, formidable problems generated by, and linked to inflation, unemployment, budgetary deficits, falling investments, and external debts were facing our country. But, despite the innumerable internal socio-economic difficulties and problems we have been facing since assuming power, and despite external uncertainties, vagaries, and vicissitudes in a fiercely competitive world, we have gradually, but surely and successfully restoring our country to overall safety. Placing it on the inevitable but right road to robust economic growth and health is, admittedly, a painful but necessary exercise. Indeed, transforming our

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country, and restructuring its economy are imperatively vital. But in the process of transformation and restructuring, the Mauritian man, woman, and child remain at the centre of our philosophy, and at that of our socio-economic, and socio-cultural objectives. Supporting and assisting those who most need state assistance, within available means, and resources remains our constant preoccupation.

It is in this context that Government has agreed to the sale of portions of State Land, on which stand ex-CHA houses, to their owners at the price of Rupees 2,000 per portion. The purpose of this Bill is precisely to legally empower and authorize such sales. The State Lands Act, as it stands, does not allow the sale of State Lands other than by public auction.

But this measure, **Mr. Speaker, Sir**, is not an end in itself, but is a means to materialize, in a meaningful and tangible way, Government's undertaking to democratize access to land, and to empower people to own land, more particularly those of our fellow citizens for whom land ownership would have otherwise remained a utopia.

I am confident that neighbours of ex-CHA house-owners, Private Surveyors, and Notaries Public will not hesitate to be part and parcel of the "*élan social*" here spearheaded by this legislative measure, and fulfil their own social obligations to their fellow citizens.

Honourable Members will recall that in the 1960's, there was an urgent and immediate need for providing housing accommodation to people rendered homeless following the destructive passage of cyclone Carol. The CHA was then set up to implement a vast low-cost housing development programme on state-owned land. The housing units thus constructed were let at nominal rents to individual occupiers. These houses were subsequently sold, but the plots of land on which they stood are still leased at a ground rent based on household income. With the closure of the CHA in 1993, the day-to-day management of the CHA was taken over by Government.

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**Mr. Speaker, Sir,**

This august Assembly will recall that there are some 19,300 houses spread over 177 housing estates over the island, and that in September 2005 Government announced its firm intention to proceed with such sale of State Lands to owners of ex-CHA houses. Since then, several meetings and consultative working sessions were held with the Attorney General's Office, with a view to introducing into the National Assembly relevant and appropriate legislation to authorize such sales. Hence, the State Lands (Amendment) Bill which provides for the Minister of Housing and Lands to sell, by private contract, such portions of State Lands. The principal change to the State Lands Act refers to Section 5, which has been amended by adding a new subsection so as to enable the owner to buy, if the owner is so willing, the portion of land on which stands an ex-CHA house, and empowers the Minister of Housing and Lands to sell it to the owner.

With effect from the coming into operation of the State Lands Act, thus amended, the prospective buyer will need to have recourse to a private Land Surveyor of the buyer's choice for the survey of the subject site, and a Notary Public to draw the deed of sale. However, owners would need, as a first step, to settle their rental arrears for the land leased.

**Mr. Speaker, Sir,**

This Bill provides the individual family with ownership of land, with the opportunity to improve its economic situation. Such families, once owners of the land on which stand their houses, will, for example, be able to obtain loans to cater for their immediate and future needs. Hence, there would no longer be need for them to seek Government's approval to pledge their rights to financial institutions as collateral for housing loans.

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There is no doubt that the legal measure in front of the Assembly aiming at people empowerment will be welcomed by all right-minded sons and daughters of our country. NGOs and philanthropic organisations assist the poor, the needy, and the economically weak. This Government assists and supports them, not as a mere propaganda, but as an act of faith in the ability of the poor to rise to the opportunity given to them to move out of their poverty and create relative wealth and well-being for themselves and their families. Owning land, and using this ownership responsibly and creatively, generate for ex-CHA house owners a whole host of opportunities and interesting challenges for themselves. They become, through ownership of land, the architects of their own fortune. This is a striking example of people empowerment.

**Mr. Speaker, Sir,**

With these words, I commend this Bill to the House.

*27 March 2007*