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Trinidad and Tobago’s Senate Approved Bill Raising Alcohol and Tobacco Age to 21

The measure would set the legal age for gambling and cannabis at 25 after a 15-12 vote backed only by government senators.

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Trinidad and Tobago’s Senate approved a bill early Wednesday that would raise the legal age for alcohol and tobacco to 21 and for gambling and cannabis to 25, advancing a contentious measure that passed only with support from government senators.

The Miscellaneous Provisions (Alcohol, Cannabis, Dangerous Drugs, Gambling and Tobacco) Bill, 2026, cleared the Senate by a 15-12 vote, with three abstentions. All 15 votes in favor came from government senators. No opposition or independent senator supported the bill. Independent senators Marlene Attzs, Francis Lewis and Alicia Pauline Lalite-Ettienne abstained, while the other independents voted with the opposition against the measure.

The bill now goes to President Christine Kangaloo for assent. It would become law once it is signed.

The vote was the latest sign of how sharply divided the Senate has been on major government legislation. In recent weeks, the government also had to rely on the full strength of its bench on the Special Operations Bill and the Public Procurement and Disposal of Public Property (Amendment) Bill. In both of those cases, the chamber split 15-15 and Senate President Wade Mark used his casting vote.

The debate over the new bill lasted several hours and centered on whether the government had made a convincing case for raising the age limits. Independent senators questioned why an 18-year-old who can vote, marry, sign contracts and join the protective services should no longer be considered old enough to legally buy alcohol or use tobacco. Some also challenged the government’s reliance on international research and said it had not presented enough local data on alcohol-related harm, road deaths and drug overdoses among young people in Trinidad and Tobago.

Attorney General John Jeremie defended the measure in his closing remarks and urged independent senators to support the bill even if they had concerns about parts of it. He argued that the higher age limits are regulatory measures backed by medical evidence, particularly in the case of alcohol. He said other countries have raised the legal drinking age to 21 and pointed during the debate to material presented by Health Minister Lackram Bodoe.

Jeremie said the government also plans to use public education and media campaigns to reduce alcohol use and access among young people. He cited the United States, Canada, Sri Lanka, Lithuania and Singapore as examples of countries that have

imposed stricter rules on alcohol, tobacco, gambling or cannabis.

In making his appeal, Jeremie referred to the late independent senator Dana Seetahal, saying she once supported tobacco-control legislation even though she was a heavy smoker because she agreed with its purpose. He argued that lawmakers should judge the bill by its objective and not expect a perfect text.

Several senators also raised concerns about the penalties in the bill, arguing that some fines were too high. Jeremie rejected that criticism. He pointed to a 2020 amendment to the Interpretation Act that increased the fine for breaches of regulations from $500 to $100,000. He also referred to penalties under the Dangerous Drugs Act that range from 25 years to life imprisonment, saying the proposed fines in the new bill should be viewed in that broader legal context.

He said penalties are meant to reflect the seriousness with which society views certain conduct and argued that the sanctions in the bill are proportionate. Jeremie also pushed back against complaints about the drafting of the legislation, saying bills go through policy development, review by a legislative review committee and Cabinet scrutiny before they reach Parliament.

If the bill is signed into law, the change would have direct effects beyond public health policy. It would reduce the group of people legally allowed to buy alcohol and could force bars, restaurants, retailers, event operators and tourism businesses to tighten age-verification checks and update compliance procedures. Businesses that sell beer, wine and spirits could also face adjustments in staff training and point-of-sale controls if the new thresholds take effect.

The measure comes as governments across the region and elsewhere continue to debate whether higher age limits and tougher controls can reduce harmful use of alcohol and other regulated products among younger people. In Trinidad and Tobago, the Senate debate showed that even supporters of stricter controls may still differ sharply over the evidence used to justify them, the age thresholds chosen by the government and the way the rules would be enforced once enacted.