

Prime Minister Rowley's remarks at the Post Cabinet Media Briefing (Thursday 29th September 2016)

Good afternoon to you members of the media, good afternoon to members of the national community. Today is a little different and I would want you to understand that I am very reluctantly engaging in this conference but it is very necessary that I do that. So at the end of it I would only take questions specific to the subject and I would not be engaging in any wide ranging press conference as such as we know we normally would.

It was not my intention to be here today, actually we had some other matters which we wanted to raise with you but given the nature of matters which have been put before the public, I as Prime Minister feel duty-bound to clarify for the public what has happened yesterday.

Let me begin by giving the assurance to members of the national community that as Prime Minister I conduct the affairs of this Office fully cognisant of the requirements of our Constitution. Against that background, I can tell you I am required by the Constitution to meet with the President and to keep the President advised as to the state of play with respect to the governance of Trinidad and Tobago. I do so on a regular basis and of course if the President requires my presence, he would so request.

This has been the way I have conducted this Office for the year that I have been in charge of the affairs of the State. My last meeting with the President in this series of regular meetings was on August 24th. On Monday the 5th of September, just about half past 9 in the morning, I was in Tobago and I received a call from the Minister of National Security telling me that he had tried to see me here in this office. Discovering that I was in Tobago, he called me to tell me that he was requested to attend upon the President. That was the first time I knew of any requirement or any intention of the President to speak with the Minister of National Security. I was surprised and in expressing that surprise to the Minister I asked the Minister what is this about. The Minister indicated to me that he did not know and was not in a position to tell me anything other than the President has asked to see him.

I then thought it might be something personal or something to do with his family or his immediate security and so on. And I said to the Minister, “Well then, find out.” And that was the end of the conversation I had with the Minister of the 5th of September.

The Minister left the country without communicating with me the following morning very early – by prior arrangement he was going abroad. He did not return to the country until the following Monday and I would have seen him immediately after that. So there was no contact between me and the Minister other than that contact I just mentioned.

The Prime Minister, Dr. the Honourable Keith Rowley, during his address at the Post Cabinet Press briefing today (Thursday 29th September, 2016). The Honourable Stuart Young (left) Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister and in the Office of the Attorney General as well as the Minister of National Security, Major General (Ret'd) Edmund Dillon (centre) were also present.

The Sunday after the conversation with the Minister, I picked up the newspapers and discovered that there was a major national security meeting between the Chief of Defence Staff, the Minister of National Security, the Commissioner of Police and this meeting was chaired by His Excellency the President. I was alarmed. I was concerned.

I did nothing; I said nothing; because the Minister was out of the country and probably would not have wanted to communicate with me other than face to face, on this development.

I came to the Office of the Prime Minister to meet in the office considerable documentation relating to this meeting. A thirty (30) point document covering virtually every area of national security and a covering letter of correspondence addressed to me and signed by His Excellency on this development.

The letter from His Excellency to me contained a phrase that had me very concerned and the phrase was that he “had the consent of the attendees” to tell me what happened at this meeting. As Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago, I did not want to rely only on my interpretation of these developments. I sought the advice of senior counsel with respect to the line of reporting and communication between Minister, Prime Minister and President on this specific matter and the normal course of it.

Senior counsel received all the documentation that I had in my possession on the matter and Senior Counsel reported back to me that my concerns were well founded. I then, through the Head of the Public Service, would have transmitted to the President correspondence of my views of this development. That is the sum total of my involvement in this matter with the President.

I summarise, contrary to what has been said, there are two (2) things I have to address. One, that I approved - not once, not twice but three times - a meeting between the National Security Minister and the President. For the record, I was unaware of any such development and it is against that background when the Minister told me that he was summoned by the President, I asked him immediately, "What is this about"? The Minister could not tell me and that was my concern.

There is a second allegation being made against me and that is that I have leaked, irresponsibly or recklessly, confidential, classified correspondence from the President to me. I have done no such thing. In fact, I do not know of any publication in the public domain of the documentation that the President has sent to me...because if you in the media have this document, which is the President's letter to me, you would be very incompetent if you had not noticed that in the document, it speaks of the very important consideration of consent required by the President for the provisions of the secret meeting to be made available to me, because that is in this document, that the President sought the consent of those who participated in the meeting to advise me as Head of the...of the Executive of this country, who chaired the national Security Council meeting and who is Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago and who would by consent of persons meeting in a secret meeting, would find out what went on in that meeting.

So I am led to believe that this document has not been in the public domain and had the accompanying documents been in the public domain, you would have in your possession somewhere the 30 point issues dealt with in the 3 hour meeting. I have not seen that in the public domain so I do not come to the conclusion that it is out there and therefore I deny that I have leaked any such document coming from His Excellency, the President.

And that being the case, when I received the advice from senior counsel, and given what this matter represents, and given how it has developed, I reported to the Cabinet and advised the Cabinet of the advice that I got and the Cabinet was told or reaffirmed the requirements of the Constitution as it relates to Ministers reporting to the Prime Minister and/or to the President. And that is the involvement of my Government and myself and my office in this matter.

I watched certain things developing and much of it developed in the public domain. Whatever transpired between the Office of the Prime Minister, through the Public Service, and the Office of the President remain on the record as part of public administration. However, as the press in doing its job, inexorably heading towards certain investigations and certain answers being sought, members of the media - and you would know who you are - would have sought by way of text messages in particular to get comments from me as Prime Minister on the carryings on and the accusations and the allegations being made about matters at the President's household, I have studiously not replied to those text messages.

I have studiously made no comment on those matters to anybody in the media and I have kept myself and my office away from those developments and that is why, having not seen the President's Press Conference yesterday in its totality because I broke off half way through the presentation, when I was first contacted by the press for a comment on the president's statement, regardless of what it was even though I had not seen it or heard it in totality my first comment to the media was I do not wish to make any comment on the President's statement - but having seen or having been told last night what was said in the press conference, I realized that I owed the public a duty of response and having seen what has been published in today's newspapers it would be remiss of me not to advise the public of the facts of this situation as known to me and as supported by the documentation in my possession.

I do not wish to drag this matter on. I do not wish to engage in any banter with the President. I simply want to put on record my knowledge of this matter and what the documentation contains. If this documentation was made available to you, you would have seen that nowhere in the epistle that was sent to me from President House was

there any reference of any prior approval for what was coming to me and in fact you would have seen other things which you have not seen at this point in time and which you will not see because I will not make it available to you.

I am sure that you may have a question or two to ask me. I hold myself open to that, specific to this matter. I am not receiving any question on any other matter at this point in time.