

Prime Minister Rowley's remarks at the Post Cabinet Media Briefing (Thursday 3rd November 2016)

Good afternoon members of the media, members of the national community at this time. I am here this afternoon not on my normal way, but I am here to complain to file a complaint to the media about the media. I addressed an important gathering yesterday as Prime Minister and Head of the Government and I had a written speech and I had an electronic copy and I am sure many of you got it. And then today I looked at all the newspapers and not one of you covered what I've said. So now as a result of that I have a legitimate complaint so I think I am going to go with the speech now so that we can be clearer as to what the thinking of the government is, particularly the position of the Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago.

But having said that, for what it's worth, I'll read tomorrow's papers to see if you have covered my speech from yesterday because I know you'll want to cover today's press conference as well. I simply want to, as Head of the Government, clarify the government's position on what is in effect a very important matter. Because I have observed your coverage and your interpretations and your reporting on what happened yesterday in terms of how the government treats with this whole question, of how the country treats with our circumstances which are diminished in some ways.

I think it is fair to say by now that the average person in Trinidad and Tobago, regardless of where you're located in the national community has a reasonable view that things are not what we would like them to be and in many cases things are a little bit strained, unstraightened. In fact some of the information available to the government on some of the matters that we are grappling with will cause even more concern than exist in the national community. But it is not for the government to panic the national community as we engage in treating with our circumstances.

But I did say as Head of the Government a little while ago that what we expect is that we would all not conduct our affairs in such a way that we are aiming to get more from less if we understand that it is less that is available at this time. What we also said that it is the government's initiative and government's understanding that notwithstanding the circumstances which we are facing, much of it having to do with external pressures upon our own economy, that we are taking steps to grow the economy and it is economic growth that is going to give us the opportunity to improve on our current circumstance and to go beyond where we were when the recent downturn began.

So the government's major objective is to grow the economy but before we get to growth we have to cross over those hurdles of the significant loss in our revenue and all that attends that and it is against an understanding of that background that I said publicly and openly on national television that there will be no increase in the emoluments of members of the Cabinet until such time as there is an increase in the economic circumstance of the country.

That is the understanding and not an understanding that there will be no improvement because the objective is to bring about improvement and therefore what I said that there will be no increase until such time as there is an improvement, I want to reiterate that it is our objective that improvements will come and in so far as those improvements come, the benefits are to be shared by all and therefore as we go forward in treating with the government's employees, and that sets the tones for the national community in the private sector as well, we expect that whatever improvements come in the economy will reflect itself in the kinds of improvements that citizens can expect at their place of claim and what has been produced.

What we have been cautioning against is an approach to anticipate greater increases or improvements than the economy has made on its own. So the key to the whole thing is to bring about economic improvement and therefore when the Minister of Finance speaks about restraint, it is exactly that; wage increases, restraint. So therefore we can't get more from less but even it is less than we been accustomed to there should be something to be had. So it is against that backdrop that I want to reaffirm the government's position in treating and in establishing NTAC which was the place at which any fundamental policy position will come on this matter and also we want to reaffirm our position in recognising collective bargaining as the approach that we take in treating in what employees of the State get from the State as the employer. We have no intention of throwing collective bargaining through the window.

There will be opening gambits and there will be conclusions of negotiations that is basically cast in stone, we don't intend to change it at all. So whatever interpretations you want to put on yesterday's statements by the Minister of Finance, I don't think that there is need for us to exercise much more on that because the government's position is very clear and we continue to ensure that any fundamental policy of the government of Trinidad and Tobago is a policy of which the Cabinet has seized and for which the Prime Minister takes responsibility for the government.

Having said that, I have heard a comment from the Opposition Leader which I really cannot ignore. The comment is that the government has declared war on the working class or the government workers.

I simply want to say to the Opposition Leader, that yes the government has declared war but the war is not on government employees or the working class. The war that we have declared is on corruption and on those persons who had made a career on conspiring to steal public money.

And insofar as we are able to prosecute this war the government will do so without fear or favour, malice or ill will in keeping with our oath of office and our duty as the administrators of T&T.

It's against that background that incidentally, even as you were being exercised by the comments on the conference yesterday, at that precise moment, the Office of the Attorney General was filing in the courts of Trinidad and Tobago, the first action of the Government of Trinidad and Tobago in Complaint against Persons who have Improperly Removed Public Monies for their own Benefit through Conspiracies and such persons are now to face the Court and the Government of Trinidad and Tobago will make the public's claim in the courts.

The matters will be adjudicated there and those who against whom the allegations are made would defend themselves there and insofar as we are able to, we'll make every effort to recover public monies that have been removed. The first of such actions have been filed in the Court yesterday at precisely the same moment that this matter becoming of public interest yesterday afternoon and that is the war that we have declared and I hope that the Opposition Leader will join us in prosecuting that war.