

Transcript – Prime Minister Rowley’s Remarks at the St Joseph Police Station Handover Ceremony

Date: Friday 25th November 2016

Venue: St Joseph

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Members of the Cabinet of Trinidad and Tobago, particularly the Min of Nat Security – Member of Parliament for Point Fortin and Minister of National Security, Major General Dillon – retired. Members of the St Joseph Community, your representative, the Minister of Health Mr Terrance Deyalsingh, the Minister responsible for UDeCOTT, the executing Agency responsible for building this facility, Mr Randall Mitchell, Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs, Senator Dennis Moses, Minister of Public Administration, Minister Maxie Cuffie, Minister of Local Government and Minister of Local Government, Senator Kazin Hosein, Permanent Secretaries and most importantly this morning I want to recognise the man who is responsible for securing us, Acting Commissioner, Stephen Williams and his officers who are present here today. I see Officer Seales, representing the 2nd Division of the Police Service, Mr Noel Garcia who is the chairman of UDeCOTT, former councillor Marcia Chan Pak who gave us the opening prayer and my own PS, Head of the Public Service, Mrs Sandra Jones, other members of the community, members of the media and most importantly the children of the St Joseph TML, who greeted us here this morning.

Ladies and gentlemen all, Thank you very much for this opportunity to participate in this very significant exercise of providing the police service with one of the finest facilities for housing police officers that I am aware of anywhere in the Caribbean.

This facility this morning represents not just a building in which the police will function but it symbolises a commitment from the people of Trinidad and Tobago to make available to those citizens whose job it is to secure us, the most comfortable and the most effective arrangements for discharging that responsibility.

We’ve all grown up knowing the police. And in all societies there is a requirement for the police. Even in heaven where there was no police, there was misbehaviour and a certain gentlemen had to be thrown out. We were told he ended up on Earth, probably in Trinidad. But the bottom line is we in Trinidad and Tobago at this time and for quite some time have been experiencing a requirement for greater and more effective policing because the level of unacceptable conduct on the part of our citizens had grown to the extent where it is now threatening everything else that

we own and that we aspire to and as we do that we start by holding the police responsible for improving the circumstances.

And how far can we go in doing that? And how different has it become for those of us who grew up knowing that the police was our friend and our protector.

I remember when I was a child, my grandfather lent one of his colleagues some money and the gentleman could not repay, I don't think he was dishonest. I think poverty in those days was such that people couldn't deal with money...they didn't have money so he ended up lending this friend some money and the guy couldn't repay. And my grandmother being what she was...who she was...she encouraged my grandfather to take him to court and he was taken to court and he didn't turn up in court and a warrant was issued for his arrest. And the poor gentleman knew that the police was after him for such a huge crime of not repaying \$300.00. So what he used to do, he used to hide away from home. He used to stay away from home until very late in the evening and he would come back into the house and he would leave very early, just before dawn and get back into the bush where he was working...in his garden and evade the police in this way.

But in those days, the police would get you. So the police, Moriah police, went under his house, waited until he was about to leave at half past three in the morning and apprehended him in Moriah and was walking him to Scarborough police station where he would be incarcerated for this very serious offence of not repaying a loan. But Moriah police would get him and they would walk him to the station...that's 6 miles of walking to execute this duty of a warrant. And as a child I distinctly recall what the police represented then. Very shine boots and very shine buttons and the authority of the State apprehending an individual. And to me that was one of the biggest things that happened in my life. There was the police, a pair of policemen, walking behind a citizen escorting him to prison. And there was respect for the police and there was the police doing the job to completion and there was the citizenry accepting that it is the police that has the duty to carry out this unpleasant duty but duty nonetheless.

How far have we come from those days where today being a police officer is putting your life on the line every hour even when you are off duty. And that there are citizens who are prepared to have themselves photographed with illegal high-powered weapons and post that on facebook to tell the country how armed they are and worse how ready they are to take on the State.

I know that there is a whole lot that the police can be criticised for. But we have to accept that is a very dangerous job and those of us who rely on the police to secure us need to support the police, and by the same token the police itself has a duty to ensure that those who call themselves police and those who wear the uniform and who are stamped with imprimatur of State to use arms and ammunition against the citizenry that you are of the highest calibre and are among the most serious of our citizens. It is an awesome responsibility to be able to apprehend a citizen, deprive him or her of her liberties and worse to conclude that you are in danger and to execute or expire life. Those are the balances we have to face.

It is now pretty normal in Trinidad and Tobago to wake up every morning and be greeted the first item of news that somebody has killed somebody and on many occasions somebody has been killed by the police.

There is a new statistic and I observe, I saw it this morning and the statistic is how many people have been killed by the police. I think the figure is now 20 for the year. But I would like that to be paralleled by how many times the police have been shot at or hurt and when we look at those 2 statistics we will get a clear picture of what has been happening in Trinidad and Tobago. We need to understand that without security, without safety of the person and property, everything else we aspire to is in jeopardy. And there is no other arrangement which we are practising now, that is known to us than to have the police and the security agencies respond in a way that would offer us a chance of that safety and that security. But against that same background we have to also make sure that our police officers are they themselves subject to the rule of law and in so far as people are hurt and harmed that all of us are hurt and harmed.

Every family that loses an individual either to a criminal act or to the police in an act of self-defence is now exposed to pain, anguish and long suffering and that is what our country is right now. But our response cannot be, and I would want to say to citizens in Enterprise this morning, the response cannot be retribution and a call to kill police members' family so that they too can share the pain of a loss. When we get to that stage we are now entering the fringe of the jungle and that can only create a worse environment.

As Prime Minister I came to this job from the Opposition. Confidently expecting to be Prime Minister at some time, and in preparation for that job, acknowledged that we needed a better understanding was needed of the policing that was taking place in Trinidad and Tobago, so as Leader of the Opposition I sent Fitzgerald Hinds to a place that was similar to Trinidad and Tobago, similar by size, similar by social structure and similar by expectation. He was sent to Fairfax county in Virginia, which is on the edge of Washington, part of Washington DC to see how policing was done there and to see whether we can learn anything from it. And we chose Fairfax country because it had a population of about 1.3 million, about the same size as Trinidad and Tobago's national population and it had a citizenry which had a fair about similarity to ours and Fitzgerald Hinds, kept me, he was a Minister of National Security at one time so he understood our policing a bit and he was a policeman himself. So he was sent to Fairfax county to spend some time, literally on the ground with the policemen there to see what was happening there and he came back and reported what he had found.

And one of the surprising things that he reported was that there were far less policemen in Fairfax county than there were in Trinidad and Tobago per capita. We all now know for sure that our per capita of policemen per 100,000 is well above the international average and well above the Caribbean average so it very well might not be a shortage of police officers on the job, on the payroll. So then what is the question? So it might well be what some police officers will tell you, not enough cars or not enough this or not enough that. But then you try to solve that and it cannot

be solved by us giving every policeman a car and then you hear it might not be enough high-powered weapons in the hands of police officers. But we have thought that one of the things that is required is a proper, comprehensive, across the board assessment of what is our police manpower and how are they deployed and how can they be re-deployed under the current circumstances to get the best of that.

And it is against that background that we have approached the British to help us with a comprehensive manpower audit of the Trinidad and Tobago police service. Tell us what our structure is, who they are, where they are, when they are there and how effective they are in responding.

I am asking the Commissioner of Police and his senior officers in particular and the 2nd Division leaders, when this exercise is executed to co-operate fully with it so we can get the best bases to go forward in making the kinds of changes that are required to bring about modern policing in Trinidad and Tobago. It is not enough for us to just keep throwing things like money or equipment into poor institutional arrangements. If there is a requirement for institutions to be adjusted, to be reconstructed so that the resources that are put in there can give the outcome, the beneficial outcome then we should be sufficiently open-minded and sufficiently driven to want to make those changes.

I look very...er.. negatively at situations and persons who take the position that change is not to be entertained and what has been accustomed is what we should continue to do. And once we take the approach that, leave it so because it works so for me then we are going to keep changing government after government as the situation worsens. There is a need for some significant changes to be made to allow the resources that we have been putting into this particular area to become more effective in the service of the people.

I am particularly disturbed and sometimes bordering on depression that the Government that I lead is being held, quite correctly, for the ineffective security of the State that exists now. But then feel totally powerless in making the known and visible changes that should be made to ensure that our police service becomes as effective as it can be.

I think it is quite unacceptable at the personal level of Acting Commissioner Williams, at the police divisional level, to have a situation where we cannot appoint a substantive Commissioner of Police in Trinidad and Tobago. I think that is completely unacceptable and all of us from Commissioner of Police, from President, from Parliament, this is an indication of the general dysfunctionality of the management of the country, and it must be addressed somewhere along the line. It just cannot be allowed to continue like this because I don't know that any war has been fought by part-time officers who have been treated in this way and you get the best out of them. What we want is the best out of our men and women who are charged with the responsibility of protecting us, that are providing us with safety and security and certainly these arrangements are not described as the best.

And my fault, your faulty, whosever fault that it is, this is the situation. Because at the end of the day, it is not the teachers, it is not the priests, it is not the doctors who will be required to respond to the unacceptable level of criminal conduct in Trinidad and Tobago. It is first and foremost the police service and of course the wider national security apparatus.

In opening this facility this morning we are providing to the police service one aspect of the support that the State provides, at great expense, to allow the police officers to function as efficiently as they could. This Station provides comfort, it provides security, it provides motivation and it provides an ability for officers to perform at their best.

But again there is another issue that arises, who are these officers? The people who enter the police service and who would rise to the rank...maybe all the way up to Commissioner of Police, must be the best citizens that Trinidad and Tobago has to offer. And therefore we need to review the arrangements by which persons enter the police service. Persons have to be thoroughly screened to ensure that you don't include into these privileged ranks persons for whom the police service is simply a place to earn a salary and worse to carry out conduct that is inimical to the interest of the national community.

We work very hard at the level of the National Security Council, at the level of the Commissioner's Office, at the level of the Station and when we think that we making two steps forward every now and again it hits us in our solar plexus every time we have to read that one officer or a group of officers conduct activities that convince the public that there is something to be distrusted or mistrusted in the police service.

Officers of the police service are the only ones who can rebuild that lost trust, that is a requirement for successful policing. If the population does not trust these people who wear these uniforms...no amount of new Station, no amount of increasing number of cars, no amount of increase in salary for the police can bring about better policing in Trinidad and Tobago. And on that basis, as Head of the National Security Council, I have exhorted the Acting Commissioner of Police, who the Parliament has given the authority to manage the police service, to ruthlessly remove from the police service, persons who are found by him to be unsuitable for the position they hold.

Failure to do so is to encourage wrong doing and to further destroy that trust that ought to exist between the citizenry and the police service. It is easy for us to condemn the entire police service on the part of the actions of a few but we all should know that there are large numbers, the vast majority of police officers are hard-working and well-intentioned and we want to nurture that but the corollary is to remove the bad apples who have found themselves within their ranks.

The Government will provide all the support that we are able to and support is not infinite. There are limits to what the taxpayers can provide to the police in terms of finance and in terms of other support. But we think we are providing a reasonable amount to get a better result and this is one of those provisions.

As I talk to you today and in the very near future we will open another Station like this in Besson Street, another one in Maracas, I think it is and of course only yesterday Cabinet finally signed off on the long awaited police station construction for Carenage.

You may recall so unfit was the Carenage police station that policemen walked out from Caenage to Four Roads and Carenge police is now housed in a dwelling house on School Street. In Carenage we are going to build a facility similar to this. That now has been authorised by the Cabinet and we move towards finalising the location and the invitation to tender and we hope that in the very near future we will be able to open a facility like this for those officers who work in the Carenge area.

And...you would have heard about community policing and you would heard a commitment from this Government to establish, within Regional Corporations, a community unit of about 100 officers per district. We believe that if we do that it would be a contribution to this target of bringing policing closer to the community. And Acting Commissioner Williams pointed this morning to the growth of the Police Youth Clubs and we also believe that if that initiative works hand in hand with the local executive, giving our young people that return to seeing the police as protectors and friends and an area of guidance, that that would contribute because there is no switch that we gonna flick to bring about improved policing and improved security in this country.

There are a number of activities that have to take place at the same time and on a sustained basis, and if we stay the course doing that then we believe that eventually we will overcome this situation where Trinidad and Tobago is facing every day an unacceptable level of criminal conduct, particularly violent crime, and expressed in the way of murders and challenges from citizens who believe that there is benefit to be had by participation in crime.

We will expect that we will get the best of our police service, starting with recruiting the best within our service. I also am thinking as Head of the National Security Council that we go back to a situation where rather than wait for people to grow from Constable to Commissioner that we go back to that situation where those persons that have been prepared outside to the police can enter the police service at the level of an officer corps, very much like you have in the Defence Force so that persons can prepare and enter into modern policing by bringing in some people, not all, some people into the service through an officer corps training so that we can always have proper succession planning.

And I don't want this to be seen by the 2nd Division as an obstacle in the way of any progress of any officer in the service. It would be a strengthening of the service because I'll tell you one thing...in-breeding of inefficiency and inappropriateness could only lead to a deteriorated and a deteriorating organisation and I think the police would benefit from a certain amount of infusion of certain skills into the service and we want to see policing in Trinidad and Tobago become a profession of highest choice of some of our best people.

I don't know how many of you are as old as I am who remember when being a police officer was something that the Bajans chose to do in Trinidad and Tobago and we had a lot of Bajans in our service because nationals didn't see the police as a place to spend their time and use their talent.

We've gone a long way from that and today, wearing the uniform of the police service of Trinidad and Tobago must be one of the professions to attract our best. And given the kinds of crimes that are being committed in today's world- cyber-crime, crimes on the internet, terrorism – it is not just officers and boots like those fellas who came down from Moriah walking to Scarborough. It is manpower. It is brain power. It is technique. It is skills that didn't even exist 10 years ago that are required by the police service today.

And a modern police service in Trinidad and Tobago requires to be populated across the entire plethora of skills required.

So today I want to thank UDeCOTT for this job that is finally done...we've had some hiccups with... it's been done and it appears to be done well. I haven't heard any complaints yet about it St Joseph as you know was one of those famous stations in the East/West corridor that enforced law and order in the community and I don't mean brutality, I mean the enforcement of the law.

Like Besson Street, you knew that there were police officers who were dedicated to ensuring that the authority of the State was maintained and I am sure that in the tradition of the St Joseph police and the Besson Street police and Trinidad and Tobago police with long history that as you provide these facilities, we anticipate, quite reasonably, that it will result in an improvement of the police of the people of Trinidad and Tobago and that we benefit from improved safety and comfort and security because until the people begin to feel safe, there is no security in Trinidad and Tobago.

I thank you for your efforts and I thank for coming here this morning. Thank you very much.

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