

Prime Minister Rowley's remarks at the Post Cabinet Media Briefing

Thursday 14th July 2016

Good afternoon members of the media. It wasn't my intention to be part of today's Post Cabinet meeting - I just came in to deal with one matter and I hope that you will allow me to just treat with one matter which I think is necessary to be addressed. I trust that the ministers who are here would have dealt with the matters of Cabinet. The matter I wish to deal with is not a matter of Cabinet that's why I wasn't really supposed to be a part of the Cabinet communication. I think it is sufficiently important for me as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago to respond to a very disturbing headline in today's Guardian.

This is still a free country and people are free to express their views. It's one of the attributes of our free democratic society. So I'm take no issue with any person's view on their assessment of any situation. However, the headline in today's Guardian is more than just an expression or view. It's an expression of a view which can have the effect of misrepresenting the country's history and the facts of certain situations with respect to public administration, public policy, racial solidarity and the peaceful stability of Trinidad and Tobago. And it's against that background that as Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago but also as leader of the People's National Movement, this party in our 60th year, we, and I say we I mean the whole population, must take note of the accuracy of the opinion expressed as fact that Patrick Manning was racist.

I do not appoint myself as defender of Patrick Manning, but as defender of the public record, I think I am duty bound to respond to that banner headline in the Guardian, that Patrick Manning, long-standing Prime Minister and Member of Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago was in fact a racist.

However young people would have read that statement today and when they have read the evidence to support that statement, it is quite possible that many of them, not just young people, but many of adults might have read it and digest it as fact. And if they do, it is quite possible that their behaviour and relationship with the rest of our society could be somehow influenced, not for the better, and that is why I am here today.

There are six or seven items of evidence which are supposed to support this statement that Patrick Manning was racist and the major one is that he closed down the sugar industry with the intention, and having the effect of bringing hardship to the Indian population of Trinidad and Tobago. I take objection to that statement because that statement is not supported by fact. I was the Minister of Agriculture in the Patrick Manning Government and I go back a bit further; sugar in Trinidad and Tobago was a private sector business and it engaged a large section of the East Indian population. And the industries as owned by the private sector, a number of small companies was going out of business in the private sector. It had nothing to do with race it had to do with the economics of the industry. But because of the tremendous negative effect that that would have had on Trinidad and Tobago and the people involved, in 1975, a PNM Government bought up all these small estates and created a state company called Caroni 1975 Ltd.

What that action did, it allowed Trinidad and Tobago, which had a sugar industry that was dying, to survive for another 20 years with significant billions of dollars of state injected funding; state support. I don't know how, and I've never seen that action on the part of a PNM government being described as a racist salvation or racist action because it had nothing to do with race, it was economics. And it was the communities involved whoever they were, that the government of the day which happened to be a PNM government had intervened in this way and created that extension of life for the sugar industry in central and south Trinidad.

That industry was surviving, even with government injection of billions of dollars along the years, was surviving mainly on the fact that the export component of the sugar as produced by Caroni Ltd went to 2 markets; the larger portion went to Europe and the smaller portion went to the United States. And in both of these markets there were special prices being offered to countries like us where higher than market prices and prices way beyond the production cost allowed us to produce that sugar, sell it on these preferential terms and continue the industry.

Then came the discussion on the global stage of the changing of terms of trade for agricultural products as part of the coming of the WTO. It took a number of years but there were indications and warnings and preparations that a time will come that these preferential prices will no longer be available and Trinidad and Tobago was required to

put its house in order so as to be able to survive when the WTO and the preferential arrangements became reality and the loss of those arrangements.

I was the Minister of Agriculture in 1991 to 1995 and in responding to this development which came after a number of attempts by other governments and other ministers; there was the Dookeran Plan, the Frank Rampersad Plan and so on. And under the Patrick Manning Government, that was Manning's first term of office as Prime Minister, we set about to get an agreement for the survival of the sugar industry in that difficult environment called the Tripartite Agreement where the Government, Labour and the company came together and hammered out the tripartite agreement to try and get the industry to survive in those turbulent waters. One of the signatories to that agreement was Basdeo Panday who was Opposition Leader and head of the All Trinidad Sugar Worker Union. After that, there was some issue involving some back pay and where the Tripartite was meant to look at a future for sugar in a different environment, The back pay became the issue for Mr Panday and he withdrew the signature from the Tripartite and refused to cooperate with it and of course the company limped along as it was absorbing approximately between 500 million and a billion dollars a year and so on. And while we did improve the pension for workers, they got pay increases and so on; the main thing was the markets were there. So the EU moved out preferential treatment and we had a date by which that was going to happen. And then came the US, so the preferential treatment in preferential markets died.

Even with the support from the Treasury in Trinidad and Tobago, with the loss of the markets, the sugar industry in Trinidad and Tobago had come to a point of no return. It's against that background that in 2002 a decision was taken to close the sugar industry in Trinidad and Tobago. It didn't only happen in Trinidad and Tobago; St Kitts had a sugar industry they had to shut it down, Barbados shut down most of theirs and a portion of it which was always private sector, in the private sector, they had no state sugar industry. There were many seasons there were difficulty in funding their industry and the crop was dependent on whether the bank will fund it or not and they still limp along with a bit of sugar in Barbados but most of the industry shut down and elsewhere across the world is what happened.

So for someone to get up today and say that the closing of Caroni 1975 Ltd was a racial act to suffer Indian people is close to sedition made to create racial discord and to disturb the peaceful fabric of Trinidad and Tobago. I was the minister involved as I just

described and working with the Prime Minister Patrick Manning, that allegation cannot be supported by the facts of the day.

I wouldn't go into the details of what happened at the time of the closure where in bringing about the closure, a number of matters were dealt with in a generous way. The Voluntary Separation was enhanced, the pension was improved and it cost the tax payers over 2 billion dollars of support for persons who were going to lose the industry and even today as I speak to you now, the last amount of money is still to come; the EU money that was made to come into the Treasury to replace the Treasury money that was used to bring about the closure and the soft landing, that money was and is being made to the sugar industry and to those same communities. So it is quite wrong and misleading for anybody to try to rewrite out country's history and to use that development that I have described which was purely in response to external changes and market negatives and saw a humane government and a humane country responding to a challenge like that and to bring that up today and to portray it as something which was some person's racist action is short of terms I would not like to use.

So I put that on the record. The sugar industry in Trinidad and Tobago enjoyed its origin after 1975 our governmental action that intervened when the private sector was closing it down. That intervention gave us 20 more years and the 20 best years of sugar because that's when sugar got proper attention in Trinidad and Tobago, Caroni 1975 Ltd.

So it's still a free country, if person want to interpret it that way, I simply put the facts on the record.

The other fact is that Manning tried to arrest Chief Justice Sharma, I simply want to put on the record that the removal of a Chief Justice in Trinidad and Tobago involves the Office of Prime Minister. Doesn't matter who is the Prime Minister, but if a Chief Justice has questions to answer which brings about any consideration of removal, it involves the Office of the Prime Minister. And in the case of Chief Justice Sharma, the record will show that the allegation of Mr Sharma's conduct did not come from Prime Minister Manning, it came from the Director of Public Prosecution, Geoffrey Henderson who indicated that Mr Sharma had done matters or done things which were deemed to be unacceptable and which triggered action which could have led to his removal. Those are the undisputed facts.

Occah Seapaul, yes Occah Seapual was put under house arrest that was a decision taken by a government of which I was a part. Because, again it's still a free country, there are other points of view, the point of view which I or I presume Patrick Manning, my leader at the time was that we were not going to allow Speaker Occah Seapaul to remove the mandate of a PNM Government which we owned in a General Election. Occah Seapaul, sitting in the seat of Speaker in Trinidad and Tobago took it upon herself to reduce the Government's majority so that the Government will fall.

She started by suspending Ken Valley and on the day when she suspended Ken Valley, she indicated openly that when the Parliament resumed the next time, she was going to suspend me and Keith Sobion and Wendell Mottley. Remember that? And we had to intervene to prevent the Speaker from doing that. I know there are others who didn't like it but I'll tell you, we took action as a government to protect ourselves from being suspended from the Parliament by a Speaker who had gone rogue. That is the country's history. The historians will discuss that and history will have been made at the time.

The bottom line is – the fact of the matter is – there was a Speaker who virtually walked out on the House, ran out of the chair so as to prevent the government from properly adjourning the House and send the threats which we got directly from her, that I will suspend you at the next sitting - simply to reduce the government's majority so that an Opposition motion could be carried to dissolve the Parliament. So that I put for the record of those who were born after that time. Feroza Ramjohn. Patrick Manning acting as a racist with Feroza Ramjohn, what is the story? Feroza Ramjohn was a public servant, who the same Patrick Manning who was supposed to be a racist, approved her relocation from Port of Spain to London on promotion. He wasn't a racist when he did that. He was a Prime Minister approving the promotion of a citizen. After that was done, the security services brought to Mr Manning's attention that in investigating a matter involving corruption with respect to Trinidad and Tobago passports, that officer seems to be have been implicated. Mr Manning in response to that information from the security services withdrew the approval for Ms Ramjohn to go to London. Ms Ramjohn felt aggrieved and she quite correctly as she was entitled to, she went to court on the matter. And laid in the court that action was taken against her to her detriment without her being given the opportunity to be heard. The court agreed with her and the court ruled that Mr Manning should have given her the opportunity to be heard.

The court never adjudicated on the matter of the passports themselves and the allegation made by the Security Council; the security department. It said that Mr Manning acted improperly when he acted on the security services' advice without giving her the opportunity to be heard. Louis Lee Sing and I95.5. Again I was in the Cabinet, I think we were a new government if my memory serves me right, we were a new government. I95 was a broadcasting station, broadcasting on a license which was held by Hillson Phillips of Tobago. Hope you all know our country's history. A license was granted to Hillson Philips in Tobago to run a station in Tobago-that was his intention-but instead I think he leased the license to the principals of I95 and I95 came into being broadcasting on a license that somebody else had. They had business problems as business partners or whatever the word and Hillson Phillips withdrew his license from 95.5 and this new broadcasting station which had introduced to our play to Trinidad and Tobago suddenly had to shut it down. Today for tomorrow.

They came to the Government and asked for a license of their own, the relevant Minister, Minister Hedwige Bereaux at the time, he brought the Note to the Cabinet, indicated what I just told you that the license was withdrawn and they need a license to continue and they being a broadcasting station in business, people will lose their jobs and so on and so on. The Cabinet was asked to approve the license. I was there. Minister Imbert was there, Minister Robinson-Regis was there.

Minister Imbert asked the question, and we all accepted the question, 'Is this the only license that is in the pipeline?' We did not agree at the moment, we asked the Minister to check and see if there were other licenses that were there waiting to be approved. The Minister reported back to the cabinet that there was no other licenses that were approvable on that day nor that time. On that basis the Cabinet approved the license for I95.5 and that station has been broadcasting ever since. Immediately after that was made known, there as a complaint from Mr Sat Maharaj that he had an application inside from the Maha Sabha and that the Maha Sabha was being denied a license and so on. The Cabinet was a little disturbed because we had asked whether there were other licenses in the pipeline and we were told that there were none. And when we investigated the matter this is what we found out. There was in fact an application where Mr Maharaj was an interested party. I'm not sure if it was on behalf of the Maha Sabha or himself. However, Dr Saith at the time was tasked in finding out why that was not approved. Turned out that the application was only partially completed and there were certain pertinent bits of information that were required to complete the application and therefor the public servants who spoke to Minister Bereaux saying that there was not another license to be approved, they would have taken the position that because the

application was incomplete, it was not a license that could have been approved and that's why they said no to us.

Dr Saith on Mr Manning's instruction in my presence was told to contact Mr Maharaj and have him fill out the application form and once it is filled out the Cabinet will consider favourable outcome. I was told that that was done under the hand of Dr Saith and there's a refusal to go along that route. And the next thing we knew in the face of allegations of racism, this matter ended up in the Privy Council and the Londoners agreed that the licenses should be granted and we stay damned for our rest of our lives that we didn't give the Maha Sabha a license because we racial. That is the story with the Maha Sabha license. The Cabinet acted in the way I just described, I was there, I was part of that Cabinet.

Then of course we're hearing another, well I don't even want to go down that road; Divine Echoes is a Christian band to play Christian music. Divine Echoes is a dance band. Playing music that people dance to, to recreate the big band of the era of golden local music; the Clarence Curvan, John Buddy Williams, Pete d'Vlute and Frankie Francis, the whole idea was to recreate that kind of music so people can get to dancing. Whether you agree or not it wasn't a Christian band playing Christian music, it was dance band playing back-in-times where Christian and Hindu, to dance. That's the whole idea. Today it's being used as proof of racism on Trinidad and Tobago.

And of course the report of John La Guerre effort is proof that Patrick Manning is racist and of course by pleasure the PNM. What did the report say? In today's papers it says that Indian people are not being promoted in the public service to higher levels. That statement is a bold statement. It's not the first story of our history. It also doesn't tell you that Mr Kenneth Lalla was the Chairman of the Public Service Commission longer than anybody else. And unless of course he was discriminating against Indians, I don't know what is the basis for using that particular statement to support today's headline.

I simply want to say in conclusion, that this is confirmation that there is free speech in this country. But this kind of free speech, in trying to rewrite our history and writing it in a way to paint us as a people who have done less than we could have to maintain peace, stability, and brotherly love in Trinidad and Tobago is not good for this country. I reject Mr Maharaj's attempt to defend what he thinks he is defending, but I will defend this country's record especially when I was a part of that record.