

WORK FOR DPP

PM says report vindicates ministers' dismissals

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Prime Minister Lester Bird claimed yesterday that the report of the commission set up to inquire into the Medical Benefits Scheme (MBS) agreed with his decision to relieve former Health Minister Bernard Percival and former Attorney-General Dr. Errol Cort of their ministerial portfolios.

In a lengthy statement on the report, three copies of which were submitted to the PM last Wednesday, he quoted the inquiry commissioners as stating:

“Mr. Percival displayed poor judgement and a misappreciation of his role as minister. This was also the case with Dr. Errol Cort who did not convince us during his testimony that he removed himself sufficiently from the process of submitting the invoice of Cort & Associates to Mr. Percival”.

The Prime Minister’s statement continued: “The commission has also taken the view that I held at the time that the conduct of the Superintendent Mrs. Cavelle John, and the Accountant Mr. Elmeade Jarvis, and others should be a matter for attention by the director of public prosecutions.

“With regard to Mr. Hilroy Humphreys, it will be recalled that in the context of what, at the very least, could be described as extremely poor judgement and disregard for procedures by a minister, I accepted his resignation immediately after this was demonstrated during the inquiry.

In addition to John, Jarvis, and Humphreys, the PM quoted the report as recommending that the DPP conduct investigations to establish whether the following should be charged with fraud or other infringements of criminal law: Bernard Percival, Norma Jarvis-Southwell, Florence George, Everett Lake, Dave George, Carlton Lewis, Andy Jacobs, Michael Johnson, Ali Challenger, Malcolm Payne and Esley Ryan.”

He stressed, however, that all the named people were free citizens who had not been charged with any offence or been found guilty of any wrongdoing.

“It is for the DPP to determine whether charges are warranted and for a Court of Law to decide upon the hearing of sworn testimony and indisputable evidence whether or not they are guilty of any wrongdoing.

“I appeal to all in our society to let the law take its course.”

PM Bird asserted that there was no finding by the commission that the Prime Minister or the Cabinet acted in bad faith, fraudulently or corruptly.

“There is a difference of opinion between the government and the commission’s report in respect of four matters,” he said.

“The first of these matters is the sum of money owed to the Medical Benefits Scheme by the government. The commission looked at the financial statements of the MBS which showed that government has never paid its contributions to the scheme and these total \$120 million.

“The commission does acknowledge that the government has contested the figure for its arrears on the basis

that the MBS owes the government a considerable sum of money since 1998 when, by Act of Parliament, the MBS was obliged to pay all the costs of the Holberton Hospital and related medical costs but has not done so.

“These costs have been met by the Treasury. Outside experts commissioned by the government to analyse the monies due on both sides have concluded that when a reconciliation is done, the government will not owe the MBS \$120 million.

“The second matter on which there is a difference in perspective between the government and the commission concerns an advance of \$2 million by the Medical Benefits Scheme to pay three obligations.

One of which was a debt to Amalgamated Security System which was manning the prison at the time.

“The point is that the commissioners were troubled that while monies were legitimately spent, they were spent in this case on matters other than health services.

“The problem was that the government was faced with a crisis. The prison had experienced a series of incidents that threatened to breach its security and place the community at risk.

Amalgamated Security had stepped in at a critical period to restore order and maintain safety. They had not been paid for some time and demanded some payment in order to remain on the job.

The third matter on which there is a difference of views between the government and the commission is the matter of waiver of tender in relation to the Mount St. John Medical Centre. The commission expressed the view that Cabinet had no authority to waive the tendering process.

“The fourth matter on which there is a difference of opinion between the government and the commission is the cost of the Mount St. John Medical Centre and the terms of the loan for its construction.

PM Bird stated that the commission had made 33 recommendations altogether but that two of these posed a problem in that they had grave financial implications.

“First, it is suggested that the Medical Benefits Scheme be converted solely into a scheme for health insurance and should not fund the health requirements of the nation.

With the best will in the world, therefore, this recommendation has such serious financial implications that it could not be reasonably contemplated at this time.

“The second difficult recommendation requires the Government to settle with the Medical Benefits Scheme for its contributions and pay immediately 50 per cent of its contributions in cash.

“...The government disputes that there is any significant sum owed to the Medical Benefits Scheme because, since 1998 the government has been meeting costs that are the obligation of the MBS.”