

HURST REPORTS ON CABINET of Wednesday, April 14 2021

The Cabinet met for more than six hours; four members used virtual means and the remaining attended face-to-face. As is the custom of the Gaston Browne-led Cabinet, invited guests are regularly brought before the Executive Body in order to enhance its decision-making.

1. The Chief Medical Officer was invited to attend the Cabinet meeting in order to solicit her advice on certain decisions which the Cabinet broached.

i. The Cabinet determined that the curfew hours will be shortened beginning Thursday 15 April 2021, commencing at 11:00 pm until 5:00 am daily. Gyms will remain closed, pending a submission from a joint committee of the enterprises; they are to point out the steps the gyms are prepared to take in order to prevent infection when given the green light. Churches, funerals and weddings remain at 25 persons; however, a meeting with church leaders is planned, and expanded conditions will be discussed next Wednesday when Cabinet meets.

ii. The CMO noted that there has been a 30% decline in infections, moving Antigua and Barbuda to an average of 3 infections daily. The CMO cautioned that a single super-spreader event can return Antigua and Barbuda to a high rate of infection. More people ought to be vaccinated in order to achieve herd immunity, the Medical Doctor advised. **If the number falling ill and requiring hospitalization returns to abnormally high levels, restrictions which now apply will have to be re-introduced.**

iii. The roll out of the second phase of inoculation which began on Tuesday, April 13, has been moderate; there is a need for more residents and citizens to vaccinate in order to make the state safer for all, including visitors. 10,000 AstraZeneca vaccines are immediately available. The Russian vaccine has not yet been approved for use (by the Antigua and Barbuda Pharmaceutical Council); it has been approved for importation.

iv. Cruise ship operators are examining the success of the administration in reducing infections; the extent to which inoculations have been administered to the population of taxi drivers, shop operators, vendors, restaurateurs—all those people with whom their cruise passengers are likely to have contact when on-shore—will be taken into account when deciding which destinations they will serve, beginning June 2021. Antigua will become a home-porting venue in a few months. Several vessels that are now inundated with volcanic ash, may utilize Antigua.

2. The Cabinet invited the Director of Education, the President of the ABUT (Antigua and Barbuda Union of Teachers) and the General Secretary of the ABUT to its meeting in order to examine the experience of the restrictive student attendance implemented on April 12, 2021; and, to address the issue of Internet service at the schools and at homes. Following a fulsome discussion on both issues, and based on the CMO's epidemiological status report, **the Cabinet determined that all schools will return to the September 2020 arrangements that were initially put in place, such that all students will have an opportunity for face-to-face lessons. The switch over will begin on Monday, April 19, 2021. All teachers and school personnel are encouraged to vaccinate in order to ensure that there is a lesser likelihood of infecting their charges.**

3. The Cabinet discussed the situation at the call center on Old Parham Road that is planning to close its doors and to eliminate approximately 150 jobs. The intervention by the administration has resulted in superior terms of severance for the workers, such that the severed employees will receive almost 100% of their annual salary, retain health insurance for the rest of 2021, and will become the owners of the computers which they once used as a tool at work. Discussions have already begun with another call center to establish a presence here in Antigua.

4. The Cabinet addressed the issue facing students from Antigua and Barbuda who are attending the Caribbean Maritime University (CMU) in Jamaica. The newly appointed CMU administration has yet to reconcile the payments made by Antigua and Barbuda--acting on the agreed package of discounts--and the amounts which might otherwise apply. The package resulted in a lesser tuition amount being paid for the Antigua and Barbuda contingent, than the estimate of the amount owed. The talks to reconcile the differences have begun, and the settled amount will be quickly paid.

5. It was reported by the Minister responsible for Public Safety that the prison population now stands at 210, and that number will be further reduced in the coming weeks by 43 to be discharged. Each person placed on remand, or convicted for a term, or is about to be discharged, is tested for Covid-19. Those entering are tested before being allowed to mix with the confined population of prisoners. All prisoners and staff have been tested, and 177 have been vaccinated. The list of diseases for which a potential government employee is to be lawfully tested, will now include the new Coronavirus disease.

6. Cabinet was informed about the progress made in the Nigel Christian murder case. The Police were applauded for their dedication and work which have resulted in arrests. The brutal slaying of the Customs Officer has been diligently pursued and assistance was sought and received from several international police investigation units including experts from the U.K., the U.S.A., and Canada.

7. The Parliament will be convened in a week to amend several pieces of legislation, and to pass new legislation. The Hemp Bill, which was passed on to a Select Committee for examination and recommendations, will be withdrawn in its current form following the discussions; a new version will be presented in due course.