

HURST REPORTS ON CABINET of Wednesday March 31 2021

The Cabinet met today for more than seven hours, four members used virtual means and nine others assembled face-to-face. It is the custom of Cabinet to invite experts and officials to its meetings in order to enhance the body's decision-making. The Cabinet also addressed policy-making in the era of Covid-19.

1. i. **The Cabinet determined that beaches in Antigua and Barbuda will be closed for four consecutive days beginning on Thursday evening, April 1, 2021, from 7:00 pm, to Tuesday morning, April 6, 2021, at 5:00 am.** The decision was informed by the rich cultural traditions at Easter among Antiguan and Barbudan families to go picnicking on the Easter weekend; and, the likelihood of a super-spreader on any beach as large numbers enter to cavort and to cluster. Last Sunday's excess numbers on several beaches also played an important role in the decision-making.

ii. **In consultation with the Director of Education, and subsequently with the Chief Medical Officer, the Cabinet decided that only the Upper Grades/Forms— (Grades 4th, 5th and 6th)--and the students at the Antigua State College, all of whom are facing exams this year and next year, will return to face-to-face classes commencing on Monday, April 12, 2021, for the start of the Third Term. The other students in the Lower Grades/Forms will continue distance learning.**

2. The Cabinet invitees:

i. **The principal of the YIDA Group and a group of investors led by one Mr. Singh were invited to the Cabinet, following a signing ceremony** between both private parties. Mr. Yida has agreed to sell 100 acres of land in the development where a medical school and a hotel will be built. The purchaser of the land for the project addressed the Cabinet, indicating his interest in Antigua dating back several years, and his determination to enhance the attractiveness of the destination to foreign direct investment. More than \$100 million dollars will be spent on the medical school project and the hotel. Mr Yida accepted that sourcing capital from his former home-country is extremely difficult; hence, he would invite others with capital to become a part of his expansive project at Coconut Hall, in order to move the project along. The Yida Project, explained the Chairman of Cabinet, is one of the most important projects in the pantheon of projects taking place in Antigua and Barbuda; it will continue to receive the full support of the administration, he declared.

ii. **The Director of Education was invited to Cabinet to address the planned reopening of government schools on April 12—the date of the start of the Third Term.** He spoke of the difficulty of having to return to a shift system and a day-on/day-off system, and that those students who are facing exams in June would be disadvantaged without face-to-face instructions in classes. Hence, he proposed that schools in the upper grades re-commence classes on April 12, 2021, while those students in the lower forms/grades continue their distance learning safely at home. There is every possibility that herd immunity is likely to be achieved by the Summer of 2021, when more vaccines arrive on island and more inoculations occur; full face-to-face classes can then resume in September 2021. The Cabinet agreed and this approach will now take effect.

iii. **The Chief Medical Officer was invited to Cabinet in order to provide advice on beach closure and reduced face-to-face classes on April 12, 2021; a) the CMO expressed support for those two policy options adopted by the Cabinet.** b) the continued closure of the offshore islands for private parties was also agreed during the CMO's discourse. c) fishers, both sport fishers and regular fisherfolk, enjoy exemptions from the weekend restrictions and may take their vessels out to sea during the Easter weekend; however, private pleasure craft are NOT allowed to set sail during the Thursday to Monday Easter closure of the beaches and seas. d) vessels transporting passengers and/or goods to and from Barbuda are exempt. e) the Cabinet, upon the urging of the CMO, who is also the Chief Quarantine Officer, called upon the APUA to provide better connectivity from the Government's Quarantine Facilities so that students and others detained may continue to communicate with their schools, businesses and homes. The APUA agreed to move immediately to strengthen the systems.

iv. **The Chairman of the Board of Education, accompanied by the body's Technology Officer, were invited to Cabinet in order to provide clarity on the laptop policy** which schools will adopt at the Board's guidance. Three schools were identified as having been selected for the pilot phase, where 1,485 laptops are to be distributed to students in the 3rd, 4th and 5th Forms. There was intense discussions among members as to why those preferred schools were selected. There was a clear advantage which schools in the city enjoyed, over schools in rural Antigua; a pledge was made by the Board of Education officials to rectify that situation. It was also agreed that there would be equitable distribution of the thousands of laptops and tablets that would follow the pilot phase; those students who have access to devices would not be eligible for the government-secured devices that are to be distributed.

3. The Minister of Information proposed to Cabinet that ABS-TV could add one more broadcast channel to the cable television system for the exclusive use of education classes. Four channels are available to ABSTV though only two are utilized at this time. That added Education Channel would feature a multiplicity of classes being taught by trained teachers at different levels, and would operate similarly to the GIS Channel that continuously broadcasts daily. The Cabinet agreed to move forward on this proposal. The Minister will coordinate with the Ministry of Education; he will report to Cabinet at the next session.

4. The Cabinet agreed to establish a BLUE ECONOMY Unit, under the Minister responsible for this subject. Antigua and Barbuda's territorial seas exceed the 170 square-mile limit of its land surface more than tenfold. The Blue Economy seeks to maximize this untapped resource by bringing expertise to the Unit which could propose various uses, including fishing of course. The parties that are to comprise this Unit will be drawn from those who are now employed within the public service so that there will be no additional salaries expense incurred by the Treasury.

5. The Minister responsible for Public Safety assured the Cabinet that all prisoners are tested for Covid, and new persons assigned to Her Majesty's Prison will be tested before being allowed to mix with the general population.

There is now a quarantine unit within the prison where those awaiting the results of a Covid test will not be allowed to mix. A person who tests positive for Covid will be dispatched to the ABDF facility at Crabbes, there to await 14 days' passage before being tested again and dispatched to HMP. The Public Safety Minister also remarked that the Department of Immigration has a similar system in place for those who are being removed from the State.

6. The Minister of Health informed that: a) the 24,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccines will be received by Antigua in mid-April. A sufficient number will thus be available to provide a second vaccine to those who took the first shot in February and March. A discussion then followed about the 10,000 doses that would remain. b) all arriving passengers at the V.C. Bird International are required to take taxis to their destinations and may not have private vehicles meet them upon arrival. The object is to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 disease to households in Antigua should the arriving passenger be asymptomatic; the taxi drivers have been trained and are required to wear the protective gear that will prevent them from contracting or spreading the virus. All taxi drivers were invited to be inoculated though a few declined.

7. The Select Committee on the Hemp Bill will meet on Thursday, April 1, 2021, to discuss the changes which are proposed by several interested parties. The Leader of the Opposition asked for more time to study the bill; he is among six others who will make an appearance on Thursday.

8. Cabinet will convene next on Thursday, April 8, 2021, since Easter Monday will intervene next week when a national holiday will be enjoyed by all.