

Hon Donaldson Romeo
Box 340 Brades
Montserrat MSR 1110

16th June, 2020

His Excellency, Governor Pearce
Governor's Office
8 Farara Plaza
Brades
Montserrat MSR 1310

Your Excellency,

First, as an elected representative of the People of Montserrat, I extend thanks to HMG for the provision of £2.5 Million Sterling as a first response to alleviate hardship caused by measures imposed to protect life during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. This clearly demonstrates a willingness to treat BOT's in a reasonable manner as HMG has done for its citizens in the UK. I note, in this regard, that the British Council's Child Protection Policy states:

[W]e have a fundamental duty of care towards all children where our programmes and operations facilitate contact with children, or have an impact on children. This includes a duty to protect children from harm or risk of harm as a result of:

- misconduct by our staff or partners
- poor practice
- **the poor design or delivery of our programmes and operations.**

We will, where reasonably practicable, both follow relevant UK laws and standards, as well as ensuring local legal compliance . . .

Surely, such is a yardstick that we must strive to match in the provision of the very basic needs of food, housing and clothing; especially for children and mothers who care for them as well as for the unemployed.

I have every confidence that this is what is expected of the GoM by HMG (DfID) in administering relief aid at a time when the GoM is responsible for enforcing lockdown measures which shut down the private sector and created widespread unemployment.

That is why I must inform you of the widespread displeasure with the poor policy and administration by the GoM of the said £2.5 Million. As a result of the inappropriate policies and the untimely delivery of financial assistance to those who were in lock down for more than two months, many men, women and particularly children continue to be negatively impacted, especially in terms of meeting basic food, clothing and shelter needs. One needs not more than mention the resulting negative impact on small businesses and the economy.

As I outlined to you by phone last week and to the general public in the recent May Assembly as well as on public radio, the obvious shortcomings need to be put right as soon as possible. Such shortcomings include, among others:

1. POLICY 1: Through the unemployment benefit scheme an adult, as the sole member of a household, is given EC \$900. If that adult happens to have one, two, three, four or more children the household still receives the same EC \$900. This means that **the children do not count** and only the unemployed adult is provided for.

(it is important to note that the EC \$900 figure was taken from established policy meant in the main to assist the elderly, disabled and vulnerable with food. Where, as a rule the Elderly typically do not face needs to support children and are usually not paying mortgages or rents, which reduces their regular expenses. Medical costs are subsidised. Also, previous studies funded by GoM and DfID concluded that it would take EC \$1,200 to EC \$1,400 to feed one individual healthily. A typical cost of utilities, communication and rent for a household of one person plausibly is EC \$700 or more; EC \$1,000 or more for households of two or more.

2. POLICY 2: Through the same unemployment benefit scheme two or more adults in a household receive EC \$1,800.00. If the two adults happen to have one, two, three, four or more children, they receive the same EC \$1,800.00. **This means again that children do not count and only the two adults count. Additional adults also do not count.**

*(EC \$1,800.00 for two or more adults means that if a household consists of four adults and four children they are awarded the same EC \$1,800.00 as a household of two adults. This also means that two adults receive EC \$1,800 while a single mother and four children get EC \$900.00. **In both cases children do not count**)*

3. POLICY 3: As part of the business retention programme the GoM will cover 80% of the salaries of retained workers up to EC \$3,200 per month (similar to what is done in the UK). Unfortunately, due to no fault of their own, employees are disqualified if the employer failed to pay monthly social security fees. This means that an employee at the top of the scale who was entitled to receive EC \$3,200 is now forced to apply for the EC EC \$900 unemployment benefit (less than 25% of salary). For example, this destabilised ability to meet rent and utility costs, exposing people to pressure regarding shelter and having their utilities disconnected; in an already long since struggling, disaster-ravaged economy where many have been forced to deplete savings.

(Clearly this administrative stumbling block means that, with the slowdown in our economy, businesses will not be encouraged to retain workers, as was intended by the GoM and DfID in turn. *A much better approach would have been to postpone the administrative issue and deal with the humanitarian crisis.* Instead, there have been public attempts to blame employers, suggest that employees demand topping up from their employers. The same employers, whose businesses have been hard hit by the lock down and who are struggling to meet rent, utility and debt obligations. **Public servants received 100% of their salaries while the unemployed in the private sector, through no fault of their own, received less than 25% of their salaries instead of the promised 80%**)

4. While in lockdown some received food packages which were all the assistance received during the two months in lockdown. Some were thankful but stated that not only was the food provided unsuitable but quite inadequate and unable to last an entire month as the GoM claimed.

Some report receiving packages woefully short of the EC \$400 which GoM claimed to provide on average. (Cash payments or perhaps, a food voucher programme allowing personal choice, would have made a difference.)

5. Many businesses are finding it exceedingly difficult to get significant help through the up to EC \$10,000 scheme also.
6. Persons who received pensions, however low, are only assisted with a top up to the level of EC \$900 given to the unemployed despite their living costs. For one whose pension is in excess of EC \$900 which can barely cover their food, housing, utilities, insurance, property taxes and other monthly expenses there is absolutely no relief assistance.
7. Bus drivers are instructed to sanitise their vehicles, insist on the wearing of masks, and as to how many passengers they could carry in provision of public transport. With the instruction to carry fewer passengers and the cost of sanitizing comes no subsidy. The outcome is obvious.

As a result of the shortcomings and slow delivery of financial assistance;

- a. It is three months since the GoM enforced lockdown (and two weeks since phased reopening of businesses and the economy has begun) deserving children and unemployed adults have not and may not receive financial assistance intended for them.
- b. Others have received one payment for April, with May payments still outstanding.
- c. Parents have had to choose between paying for their utilities, telephone and rent instead of buying food, toiletries, medicine, for themselves and their children, etc. Children in particular have been receiving poor and inadequate nutritious food.
- d. Some are threatened with eviction for not having paid rent for the two months in shutdown, **unlike what is the case in the UK and US where eviction for non-payment of rent is forbidden during COVID pandemic period.**
- e. Some have had their utilities or phone communication cut or have significant amounts outstanding.
- f. Many were and still are not able to service business, mortgage or personal loans
- g. Some are confused and were discouraged from applying for unemployment packages because of the negative experiences which the bureaucratic process has caused
- h. Some report discrimination towards specific groups and many are fearful of reporting discrimination they have experienced for fear of being targeted
- i. Businesses which have opened report low spending on the part of customers who appear to be facing financial hardship and are already cutting back on salaries and working hours of staff.
- j. With such obvious and persistent neglect, the GoM can may experience less cooperation from the public next time around.

It is manifest that the policies and administration have been grossly inadequate.

All of these poorly framed interventions and their untimely and bureaucratic delivery have increased the level of social and economic hardship HMG's relief aid was meant to address.

Particularly note:

- the inadequacy of the EC \$900 apportioned to one adult drawn from an already inappropriate policy meant to provide for the elderly and vulnerable,

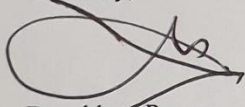
- the same payment of EC \$900 to one adult as is paid to a single mother or father with 1,2,3,4 or more children in a household,
- the same payment of EC \$1800 to 2 adults as to 3, 4, 5 or more adults in a household or to two or more adults living with 1,2,3 4 or more children,
- the non-consideration of the food, shelter and educational needs of children in financial packages regardless of how many children in a household,
- the denial of subsidised salaries to some for no fault of their own, where some get 80% of their salaries while others receive as little as 25%,
- some businesses are excluded from the \$10,000 grant because of having more than 5 employees, by not being up to date with Social Security payments and are unable to service loans which have accumulated during lockdown and beyond,
- the non-consideration of the circumstances faced by pensioners and retirees,

How will the public respond should there be a second wave and they are called on to lockdown at home once more?

It so happens that you are President of Cabinet where policy is formed as well as head of the Public Service responsible for the delivery of Government policy. At the same time, you are HMG's representative and watchdog for good governance and fairness in the design and delivery of HMG's funds intended to bring relief during this crisis.

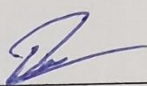
I therefore call on you as the person designated in the 2010 Constitution Order as leading the Cabinet to call attention to these concerns and to initiate reconsideration. For the good of all, I trust that we can also move to more responsive, fair and beneficial policies.

Sincerely,

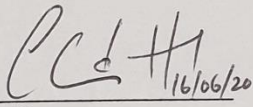


Donaldson Romeo,
Opposition Member, MLA

With the support of

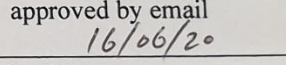


Hon Lewis,
Leader of the Opposition,



Hon Hogan,
Member of the Opposition, MLA

approved by email
16/06/20



Hon Osborne,
Member of the Opposition, MLA

Cc: Hon Premier Taylor Farrell
Ministers and Members of the Montserrat Legislative Assembly
Hon Deputy Governor