

Ex-Minister disappointed over criminal convictions

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Convicted on money laundering charges he strenuously denies, former Government minister Donville Inniss has pledged to fight the USA judicial system with every sinew in his body to prove his innocence.

Inniss, who faces sentencing in November, lost a motion last month to have his conviction overturned based on the insufficiency of the primarily circumstantial evidence presented by the prosecution. In her judgement, District Judge Kiyoo Matsumoto said such motions rarely succeeded and in determining whether to grant a motion for judgment of acquittal, the court not only had to view the evidence in the light most favourable to the prosecution but had to be careful not to usurp the role of the jury. Inniss indicated that he has not had the opportunity to discuss the Judge's recent ruling with his lawyers.

But in an exclusive conversation with **Barbados TODAY**, Inniss said he was neither bribed by Insurance Corporation of Barbados Limited (ICBL), influenced the issuance of insurance contracts from the Barbados Investment Development Corporation (BIDC) or had any meetings with ICBL personnel regarding BIDC insurance contracts.

“There was no communication between myself and the board members of BIDC regarding issuance of insurance contracts. For me as minister to have influenced the process, I would have had to influence the board of the BIDC and the board members included a Barbados Manufacturing Association (BMA) representative and trade union representative. It wasn't just political appointees. I consider the then BIDC board to be very competent and very professional and they would not have allowed any minister to dictate such to them. I was very proud of the board that served then,” he said.

In January Inniss, who served as Minister of Industry, International Business, Commerce and Small Business Development, was found guilty of money laundering. He was accused of being paid \$36,000 to guarantee the renewal of a contract with the BIDC and subsequently transferring the money to his US bank account.

The former minister added: “One of the points that I wish to get over too is that when I finally reviewed documents that I have been made privy to recently, the ICBL at one point in time held 100 per cent of the BIDC insurance. This was eventually dwindled down to 50 per cent during my first year as Minister of Industry. In the 2014-2015 period, the three insurers were ICBL with 50 per cent, CGI [Consumers Guarantee Insurance CO. Ltd.] with I think 30 per cent and Trident Insurance about 20 per cent. In 2015-2016, which is the year in dispute, ICBL got 70 per cent and CGI got 30 per cent. And I have had sight of the minutes of the board meetings of BIDC where the insurances were discussed in the presence of all board members, where it was decided that ICBL should get 70 per cent and CGI get 30 per cent because on documents I have seen since the trial, the board had concerns about Trident Insurance. And the board took the decision that ICBL should get the additional 20 per cent that previously went to Trident and CGI got 30 per cent.”

Inniss said there was nothing untoward involved and nothing for him as the minister in which to get involved. He stated that Trident Insurance wrote to BIDD and raised concerns as to why they were left off the insurance contract and the BIDD board discussed the matter again and stood its ground on the decision made.

“As far as I can recollect, at no point in time did the chairman of the BIDD seek my opinion on the matter, either formally or informally. All previous board members are still alive and of sound mind as far as I am aware, and therefore are free to agree or disagree with this position,” he said.

Inniss added: “The other thing of interest to note is that when I was minister the BIDD was directed to go to tender for the issuance of insurance brokerage services because they had been spending more than \$100,000 a year on broker services and the concern was that they were breaching the **Financial Management Act** that said you had to get three quotes or go to public tender. They went to tender and they retained the services of CGM Brokers as the lead broker and CGM is the entity that advised BIDD to go with ICBL, Trident and CGI again as they had done previously.

“Before there was Trident in there, there was Guardian General and as far as I have been able to gather, Guardian indicated they no longer wanted BIDD’s real property business. There were reports from officials that indicated that there was no other insurance company in Barbados that could carry the bulk of BIDD’s business besides ICBL at the terms and conditions most favourable to BIDD and the island.

CGI also said they didn’t want anymore of the business at the time, I was advised subsequently. At the board meeting they went with CGI, ICBL and left off Trident. So ICBL got 70 per cent, CGI got 30 and the insurance contract was awarded for two years on the condition that the [insurance] rates weren’t raised. The rates that they paid were about the same that they paid in 2014, so they ain’t pay no more money in the insurance.

“In 2017-2018, when I was still minister ICBL got 55 per cent in insurance, and CGI went to 45 per cent and that was for two years. I am now advised that was reviewed a few months ago in 2020 with ICBL maintaining the same 55 per cent and then the rest between CGI and other companies. So even in the midst of all of this, it is quite clear that ICBL is the only company in Barbados that seems capable of carrying the bulk of BIDD business.”

Inniss said it was also instructive that chairman of the board of the brokerage company CGM Brokers, John Roachford, was appointed BIDD chairman in June 2018 and is still chairman to date. He revealed that there is an August 2018 report from the BIDD on the issuance of insurance for the 2015-2017 period when he was minister that shows all the reasons and processes that transpired and how ICBL arrived at 70 per cent of BIDD business. The former St James South MP also said there was a report based on interviews the Royal Barbados Police Force conducted with senior staff at BIDD, namely the legal secretary, chief executive officer and director of finance. Those reports indicated from management that there was nothing Inniss did to interfere with the process and they indicated why ICBL got the 70 per cent.

Inniss said during that same period other politicians from both the Democratic Labour Party and the Barbados Labour Party also received monies from ICBL which were political contributions. "Were they considered bribes too? Politicians from both sides of the political fence. I have no reason to believe they were bribes, they were political contributions," he said.

He noted any findings by Barbadian authorities should be made known to the public. "The matter was also investigated by the Barbados authorities and I don't know what were the findings but they are free to tell the public. I have no secrets. There is no email, no text message, no form of electronic communication that I am afraid of the public seeing. There never was and there is none now but I have been convicted in the USA entirely on circumstantial evidence at a time when I didn't have the financial resources to get people in Barbados to provide information or even to fly up to the US to testify on my behalf and help my case.

"Let me state here that at no point in time did I ever deny receiving money from ICBL – I never did. I did not deny to the authorities here or anywhere that I received money indirectly from ICBL in the US or even in Barbados. I indicated to my lawyers and all parties that any monies I received from ICBL were all through third party and all as political contributions. So I didn't hide anything, there is nothing hidden. I must also make the point that a review of my personal finances during the period would indicate that I had no reason to engage in any such nefarious activities as others may be hinting at.

"I was accused of preparing false invoices and I was most shocked when I sat in the courtroom and heard the former chief financial officer of ICBL admit that she is the one that created false information and that she had been granted immunity from prosecution by the US authorities providing she comes to the US at their expense, airfare, accommodation, to testify against me. But she may have committed a crime in Barbados and the Barbados authorities were free to have picked her up for questioning, but that is not my concern," he said

Inniss added: "I also will say that I have been prosecuted on a statement that I spoke to Ingrid Innes, the CEO of ICBL [also indicted but not arrested] about BIDC contracts. Whilst Ingrid Innes did write to me regarding the indebtedness of the Government of Barbados to ICBL and sought my assistance in resolving related issues between the Ministry of Finance and ICBL, she certainly did not discuss BIDC business with me. It was a letter that she wrote to former finance minister Chris Sinckler, she did not get a response and she sent it to me and asked if I could assist her by discussing the matter with Chris Sinckler, which I did. The outcome of that discussion I don't know what it was. I may have consumed a bit of vodka or rum at the Bush Bar and other watering holes in Barbados, but such never impaired my memory.

"I have kept quiet over the last two years because I was advised not to say anything, to let the matter take its course but I feel duty-bound to have a conversation with the people of Barbados. Because it has not just been embarrassing for me and my family, it has been embarrassing for Barbados. And I take the point that I have always said, if I engaged in an illegal act like that, I would not have wasted the court's time, wasted my money hiring lawyers, I would have admitted to it and pay the price."

Barbados TODAY investigations revealed that former ICBL director Juanita Thorington-Powlett, now a government consultant, had written to the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) in October 2016 requesting that the money transaction be investigated. Inniss said he would welcome the FIU telling Barbadians whether they investigated the matter and what were their findings.

“I do not have money to fight [the case] the way I would like to fight but whatever limited resources I have I will fight. Because what was done to me by the US authorities and by ICBL and others in Barbados should not be done to any other person who offered themselves to public service in any developing country,” he said.

Inniss explained that as a result of the case he had lost most of what he had worked for over the years. He added there were some people who might feel he should die in a jailhouse somewhere in the United States but he was going to fight his conviction with whatever limited financial resources he might have.

The former minister said he had only heard from three members of the Democratic Labour Party who contested the 2018 general election with him. He declined to name them but said he understood that when one was not in politics one had few friends. “I have been treated like I had COVID-19 even before it left Wuhan Province [China]. I have spent enough years in party politics to know that when you are in office you have all the friends in the world, but when you are out, you have a plague, and my situation only makes it worse for myself and my family in particular,” he said, adding that no one from the Barbados Embassy in the United States had checked on him or reached out to him as a Barbadian. Inniss also has American citizenship.

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