

Shhh! PM warns public sector workers to uphold secrecy law

Simpson Miller & Tyrone Reid, Jamaica Gleaner Online

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Despite Government's pledge to repeal the Official Secrets Act, which has left a legacy of secrecy in the public sector, Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller sternly warned civil servants on Friday that they must abide by the tenets of the secrecy law.

Earlier this year, former Information Minister, Colin Campbell, gave the commitment that the 95-year-old piece of legislation would be repealed. At that time, Government Senator Professor Trevor Munroe noted that four years after the Access to Information (ATI) Act received the nod from Parliament, the Official Secrets Act of 1911 still remains on the books. "How can you have in one jurisdiction, a law which says you and I have a fundamental right to information, and another law which says there is an obligation to hold official secrets? It makes no sense," he said. "(The) Official Secrets Act must be repealed now, not one day after the next meeting of the Parliament."

PM's warning

However, while addressing a staff meeting at the National Indoor Sports Centre with civil servants from agencies and ministries under her portfolio, Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller reminded her employees that the Act was still in force. Under the Official Secrets Act, civil servants who divulge information deemed classified, that comes to them while employed by the State, during or after their tenure of service, could be found criminally liable by the courts and sentenced. "Access to information, yes, and we give the information, and we are not to hide, we are to be transparent and we are to be accountable. "But people talking about who give them information and who (does) not. I (am) just warning you, staff, be careful, there is something known as the Secrecy Act and there (is) information, particularly information relating to people's personal affairs, their bio data, their medical records, nobody has the right to be leaking information on people," said Prime Minister Simpson Miller. "I hear all kind of rubbish being spoken outside there, (but) I will deal with that at the appropriate time," she added.

Mrs. Simpson Miller told the gathering, which included Dr. Carlton Davis, Cabinet Secretary, and Pat Sinclair-McCalla, Permanent Secretary in the Office of the Prime Minister, that while they reserved the right to support the political party of their choice, none of them should be disclosing information to the Jamaica Labour Party (JLP). "What you do not have a right to do, though, as government workers, is (to be) leaking information to an Opposition that feels it can only thrive and will only be able to make a dent in the country by creating scandals around the Government," she said. "The institution of government is one that should be protected by both Government and Opposition, and seeing that one set does not have any vision, I have a responsibility to ensure that," she continued.

In support of her point, Prime Minister Simpson Miller said that kidnapping started in Trinidad and Tobago because information regarding people's financial standing was leaked to hoodlums. She also mentioned that, recently, in Parliament Donald Buchanan, Minister of Information and Development, heckled an Opposition member who retaliated by telling him to go pay his debt. She said the Opposition member was able name the bank and the exact amount owed by Mr. Buchanan. "And, is that not dangerous and deadly?" she queried. "Suppose Omar was to come out and talk all the information he has on all the people not paying tax in this country? Suppose Derrick Kellier should come out and say all the business

people who (are) not paying over, or all of us who are supposed to pay NIS not paying over our portion for the workers?"

Intelligence information

She continued: "Suppose Peter Phillips, Minister of National Security, should come out and talk about all the intelligence information he might have on some people walking around freely in this country. And, suppose the Prime Minister should talk about information that I have to carry around in my head, and not my pillow; and I know I don't talk in my sleep, so I know I am ok," she said. "Suppose we were to go and run off our mouths for sheer politics or trying to win election, oh no, we have a bigger responsibility than that."

Mrs. Simpson Miller argued further that, "if the country chooses to have a government that will go and check into people's private business and private accounts, and then know how to hold them to ransom, then the country is free to do that. "But, as long as I am the leader of this country, that will not be allowed under my administration or any other, and I am going to make certain of this."