

■ PM Browne:

No corruption in ECCB residence

■ ST JOHN'S

ANTIGUA and Barbuda Prime Minister Gaston Browne says the Monetary Council of the Eastern Caribbean Currency Union (ECCU) has agreed that it should be kept 'up to date routinely' on projects in excess of US\$3.7 million (EC\$10 million) following the controversy over the construction of the multimillion-dollar residence for the governor of the bank.

Browne said that the issue had been discussed last weekend at the 111th meeting of the council and that there had been the recognition of several flaws regarding the project.

'What we...noticed too that whereas the tendering process would have literally mandated that the lowest bid be accepted at the end of the day, that bid was also flawed, because the other three bids came in excess of EC\$20 million (US\$7.4 million),' said Browne, who has assumed the chairmanship of the council.

'So, there were issues in terms of the lowest bid...and we felt that perhaps that the quantity surveyor at the time should have picked up that particular anomaly. So, one thing I can say for sure, there's no evidence of any malpractice by anyone who was responsible for monitoring this particular project.

'In fact, it went through all of the necessary procedures. For example, the bids went to tender and they were selected accordingly-bids for the consultants, for the contractor, architect, and all of the procedures were followed. This particular project is managed primarily by the board of directors.

'As you know, the council itself and council members...concentrate primarily on policy formulation and the history of the operations of the council is such that it does not get involved in project management, so you did not have that regular, let's say, feeding of information to the council,' he added.

Earlier this year, St Vincent and the Grenadines Prime Minister Dr Ralph Gonsalves wrote to Browne suggesting that the Grenadian-born governor of the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank (ECCB) 'of his own motion may wish to consider whether or not his continued occupancy of his office is tenable in all the circumstances' as it related to the construction of the residence.

'This is likely to be a painful, personal decision,' Gonsalves wrote in the February 17 letter to Browne, a copy of which had been obtained by the Caribbean Media Corporation (CMC).

Gonsalves wrote to the Antigua and Barbuda leader, indicating that he had become aware of the matter through his son and Finance Minister Camillo Gonsalves, who is also a member of the ECCU Monetary Council.

Gonsalves said his finance minister had advised him 'regarding the extraordinary sum of EC\$22 million (US\$8.14 million) being expended by the governor of the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank to construct an official residence for the governor.

'This act of excessive spending is outrageous,' Gonsalves wrote in his letter, adding: 'It's an absolute scandal. 'Clearly, there has been an insufficient transparency by the governor on this matter, and the oversight expected by the internal review mechanisms of the ECCB, the board of directors of the bank, and the Monetary Council has self-evidently been below acceptable or prudent standards.'

-CMC