

SUMMARY OF THE INTERIM REPORT OF THE
COMMISSION OF ENQUIRY OF THE ORANGE
STREET FIRE

Members of this Honourable House will recall that on the night of the 19th May, 1976, the premises commonly referred to as 182-184 Orange Street in the Corporate Area of Kingston and St. Andrew, was the scene of a most devastating fire.

2. Many dwelling houses were burnt to the ground, an untold amount of furniture, personal belongings were destroyed; several lives of human beings and domestic animals were lost, and very little was left standing and intact shortly after midnight on the 19th May, 1976.

3. The intensity of the suffering and ugly rumours as to the circumstances of the burning were highlighted by the news media at home and abroad, and as a consequence, His Excellency, the Governor-General acting on the advice of the Honourable Prime Minister appointed a Commission of Enquiry under the Commissions of Enquire Act, with the following terms of reference -

- (a) To enquire into and report on the circumstances and causes of the destruction by fire of premises situated at Nos. 182-184 Orange Street, in the parish of Kingston, on the night of the 19th May, 1976; and thereafter.
- (b) To enquire and report on the circumstances and causes of the incidents of violence and destruction which have been taking place in the parishes of Kingston and St. Andrew, commencing with the fires which took place in Trench Town in January, 1976.

4. Mr. Ronald Small, a former Puisne Judge of the Supreme Court of Jamaica was appointed as the Commissioner of Enquiry on the 28th May, 1976. after a series of 28 sittings and various interviews, the Commissioner's interim report on the first limb of the reference has now been received. In keeping with the assurance which the Honourable Prime Minister gave to the country that the findings would be made public, a summary of the interim report is accordingly presented for the information of this Honourable House.

022441
Ja
13/10/77

5. The interim report makes the following conclusions -

- (i) that it is quite clear that the Orange Street / Orange Lane premises were deliberately burnt down;
- (ii) that the operation was carried out by a gang or gangs of young people with violent intention to life and property;
- (iii) that the threats that were made on the occasion of the Fletcher's Land fire of the 10th May, and followed up with occasional assays of violence in the area were not idly made, but part of a well worked out and ordered plan, to induce inattention and unpreparedness, a plan to strike and cause confusion and terror when most people would be retired, and unattired and gone to bed.

6. The report refers to the fact that on the 19th May, 1976, the 'Potham gang' including Errol Potham his nephew Donald Reid, Victor Roache and Neville Chin were returning from a show at the Tropical Theatre, and three groups of youngsters, apparently acting with one common mind and purpose surrounded them, killed Potham, severely burnt Reid and Roache with acid and chased Chin down without catching or hurting him. It appears to the Commissioner that the events of the night of the 19th May and the three-pronged assault on the gang that had attended the show at the Tropical Theatre were not un-related to previous and subsequent events.

7. The report points out that the area in question was in the past strongly in favour of the Jamaica Labour Party, and then became at the relevant time a peaceful 50-50 People's National Party and Jamaica Labour Party leaning.

8. The Report draws attention to Allegation of the "Foreign and un-Jamaican" character of the violence displayed on this occasion as well as other occasions not yet investigated by the Commission, in an effort to identify the evil deeds of the Orange Street tragedy as belonging to the Jamaica Labour Party. Attention has also been directed to allegations of a scheme by the governing party the People's National Party, to remove and save those whom they preferred and burn out with fire the unwanted and those who were antagonistic to their interests.

/it.....

It emphasised, however, that in all the thrust and parry of the then political struggle nothing has emerged as being organised and implemented by either party.

9. In summary the report makes it clear that --

- (a) the acts of destruction on the night of the 19th May were deliberately calculated,
- (b) It was not difficult to establish that the youths of the country were used to perpetrate this dastard deed;
- (c) that a small body of machiavellian men has steered these youngsters to this end: and
- (d) while there are thugs and hoodlums in both political parties i.e the Jamaica Labour Party and the People's National Party, there is no evidence to show that these gangs are receiving aid, comfort and sustenance from either leaders of the party or the organisations of which they are head.

10. Members of this Honourable House may wish to know why it is not possible for the Interim Report itself to be laid on the Table of the House: The sittings were held in private in order to evoke the uninhibited response of witnesses, and also, to ensure the safety of those who came forward to give evidence. A substantial part of the Report is in verbatim form which if disclosed would remove the safeguards for those witnesses, which the in camera sittings were intended to ensure.

R. Carl Rattray
Minister of Justice
16th February, 1977