

Rowley sits out vote for PM

Stuart beats Penny 11-9

TOBAGO

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STUART YOUNG is the chosen one by a slim 'majority' of 11 to nine for Penelope Beckles. The Energy Minister and Minister in the Office of the Prime Minister emerged as the pick of People's National Movement (PNM) MPs to replace Prime Minister Dr Keith Rowley when he demits office before the end of March 2025.

The move is an historic one, as Young has never been the PNM leader and has never led the party into any general election.

On January 3, Rowley announced that he intends to resign as Prime Minister before the end of the legal limits of this term. A day later, he promised that a Prime Minister would be named.

Young's name was revealed by the Prime Minister himself yesterday, following a two-day PNM parliamentary retreat at a private villa in Tobago Plantations, Lowlands.

Rowley, dressed in grey trousers, a red, grey and black long-sleeved shirt, and leather slippers, said there were two contenders for the post: Young and Planning Minister Penelope Beckles.

Speaking to the media for just over 30 minutes from the steps of the villa, Rowley, in response to a question about the vote numbers and whether there was a close race between Young and Beckles, said, 'You want to get inside the PNM. At the end of the day, we had a straw poll among the caucus and Minister Young came out with the majority. It doesn't involve a three-quarters majority or a half majority.'

Asked if it was a 'slim' majority, he replied, 'My idea of slim and yours is not the same. How many football matches have been won by one-nil?'

The *Express* understands that by a vote of 11/9, Young prevailed over Beckles in the straw poll of the elected MPs. The Prime Minister did not participate in the vote.

At the news conference, Rowley also pointed out that, under Section 76 of the Constitution, the President appoints a Prime Minister who commands the majority of the House of Representatives, and Young received that majority.

'In the end, we came up with a situation where the entire PNM caucus is in support of Member of Parliament Stuart Young,' he said.

The news was no surprise, as since last year, some PNM members were speculating on the possibility of Young emerging as Rowley's successor. Young was the only minister, aside from Finance Minister Colm Imbert, whom Rowley entrusted to act as Prime Minister.

Rowley has always praised Young, referring to him once as his 'Gary Sobers'.

Smooth transition

The Prime Minister said the promise of a smooth transition is going 'according to plan,' adding that the PNM is a very stable and democratic organisation.

When asked how soon he expects Young to assume the position, Rowley said there are a couple of things he is committed to completing before leaving office.

He stated that he will attend a Caricom meeting in Barbados on February 19, 2025, where he will wrap up work on committees he chairs related to national security and West Indies cricket.

'And sometime after that, I will indicate the actual date when I leave,' he said.

Rowley added that when he returns to Trinidad, he has a few matters to conclude. 'I should be ready for Carnival and ready for moving out of this position,' he said.

The general election date will be called by Young, he said.

While Rowley is retiring as Prime Minister, he remains the PNM political leader, a post that expires in 2026.

He stated that the issue of PNM leadership will be addressed at the PNM Convention on September 28, 2025.

The *Express* noted that, historically, the PNM leader has led the party into elections and, when victorious, becomes Prime Minister. When asked how PNM members might react to Young becoming Prime Minister despite not leading the party into elections, Rowley said: 'I expect that the PNM membership will understand the circumstances. The PNM membership knows that we don't go to a convention during an election year. That's where we are, we start with that.'

He continued: 'Secondly, the PNM membership will understand and know that a PNM Minister being selected by the President is the best option for the country.'

He expressed confidence that PNM members would prefer a PNM member as Prime Minister.

The *Express* asked who will lead the PNM into a general election, given the party's convention is not until September 28 and an election is due before then, Rowley responded: 'Then we go to the election before the convention. It's that simple.'

Pressed further on who will become Prime Minister, Rowley said: 'You have to ask the voter that.'

Resignation well organised

When asked by the *Express* about his decision to step down during a state of emergency (SoE), Rowley said he is still the Prime Minister until he leaves.

'The bottom line is when I leave, the person who will replace me will be just as strong,' he said.

He emphasised that his resignation was 'quite well-organised well in advance'.

Responding to criticisms that he is leaving office after accepting a salary increase and pension from the Salaries Review Commission (SRC), Rowley stated he took no part in discussions with the SRC regarding emoluments for his positions.

When asked if he has any regrets upon leaving office, Rowley replied: 'No, I think I used my time in a useful way. I was not always successful in everything I embarked upon, but by and large, I believe I was able to contribute- not only for my children but for every child in the country.'

He added that although the job was sometimes stressful, he persevered for the wider national good.

The outgoing Prime Minister expressed satisfaction with leaving public office, saying: 'I'm in relatively good health, and I look forward to enjoying the time I have left.'

Regarding his plans post-office, Rowley said he hopes to enjoy more leisure time with family and friends, especially his grandchildren, on the farm, at sea, and in Barbados.

'And, of course, don't let somebody hear this because they will be very upset- play some golf,' he concluded.

Screenings continue

Regarding preparations for the general election, Rowley said PNM general secretary Foster Cummings has been advised to open nominations for the two Port of Spain seats and three Diego Martin seats, including his own constituency of Diego Martin West. Nominations will also open for D'Abadie/O'Meara (now Mausica/ Maloney), previously occupied by Lisa Morris-Julian, who tragically died in a fire.

The closing date for nominations is January 27, with screening to follow shortly thereafter, he said.

Rowley, as PNM political leader, will continue to head the screening process and approve candidates for the election.

He assured that the PNM will be 'very ready' for the general election.

Rowley said he spoke to his constituency and they assured that there would be no hiccups in Diego Martin West and promised a 'worthy' replacement will come.

When asked if Dr Amery Browne will fill the post, Rowley noted that such reports were dismissed as not factual. **with reporting by Ria Taitt**



CENTRE OF ATTENTION: Prime Minister Dr Keith Rowley addresses members of the media at Tobago Plantations yesterday. -Photo: CURTIS CHASE