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key questions from MPs on CPIB's Iswaran probe

MPs raised clarifications in Parliament on Wednesday following Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's ministerial statement, which addressed the Corrupt Practices Investigation Bureau's (CPIB) investigation into Transport Minister S. Iswaran.

These included broad questions on when to publicly disclose an investigation and the types of investigations, as well as specific questions such as why Mr Iswaran's salary was cut to \$8,500, instead of him being put on no-pay leave.

The questions were answered by PM Lee and Minister-in-charge of the Public Service Chan Chun Sing.

Here are six key questions and their answers covered over three hours:

1 WHO DOES CPIB REPORT TO?

Mr Saktiandi Supaat (Bishan-Toa Payoh GRC) asked whether there

were guidelines on disclosures for investigations involving ministers, amid the social media age.

PM Lee said that on disclosures involving ministers, one has to judge the situation.

The CPIB had judged as such, and PM Lee had supported it in the case of Mr Iswaran.

In this case, a statement was put out that CPIB was interviewing a minister.

This was not so for the previous precedent. When Mr Teh Cheang Wan was investigated in 1986 as the minister for national development, none of it was announced, said PM Lee.

This is because one does not know if there is anything there, he said.

If it is announced that the minister is being interviewed, and it turns out there is nothing, and three days later his innocence is declared, "I think you're going to cause great consternation, and at the end of that, reputation will be damaged undeservedly", said PM Lee.

In the case of Mr Iswaran, CPIB judged that the threshold to say it was talking to Mr Iswaran was met right from the beginning, as others such as tycoon Ong Beng Seng were going to be called in.

"Therefore, it was not possible for this thing to be kept quiet and it had to be stated upfront," PM Lee said.

"I think we are reading a lot into very little. First of all, nobody knew Mr Iswaran might or might not have been doing something wrong.

"CPIB found out. Nobody tipped them off, nobody blew a whistle," said PM Lee.

The CPIB then went to PM Lee

and asked for his concurrence.

"Because CPIB reports to somebody. It has to report to somebody, it can't report to God," said PM Lee.

An extra safeguard is in place, where the director of the CPIB can go to the president if the prime minister has refused consent.

"That's how two keys work and therefore the matter stops there. Is it guaranteed? No. Because the prime minister may be corrupt, the president may be mistaken."

2 HOW DID PM LEE DECIDE TO CUT ISWARAN'S PAY TO \$8,500?

Responding to Mr Saktiandi's second question on how the decision to cut Mr Iswaran's pay to \$8,500 came about, PM Lee said that it was considered carefully, as there was no precedent for a prime minister to have to interdict a minister.

He looked at the civil service as a guideline before making his decision.

The practice in such situations is to interdict the person and put him on half pay, subject to a ceiling and a floor till the matter is disposed of.

If, at the end of it, the person is found innocent, back pay is reinstated and made good. If the person is found guilty, pay stops and other consequences follow.

"I think that is a reasonable model to follow, and that is the basis on which I decided that Mr Iswaran would be interdicted, and that he will be paid \$8,500 per month instead of his normal salary," said PM Lee.

3 WHY WASN'T ISWARAN PUT ON NO-PAY LEAVE?

Responding to Non-Constituency MP Hazel Poa on why Mr Iswaran



Mr Saktiandi Supaat asked about guidelines on disclosures for investigations involving ministers.



Ms Hazel Poa asked why Transport Minister S. Iswaran was not put on no-pay leave.



Associate Professor Jamus Lim asked about extending the institutional reporting line for the CPIB.

was not put on no-pay leave, PM Lee said it was his judgment to make.

In the civil service, if a person is convicted, he is then put on zero pay.

"Here, I have to be fair to the minister involved, as well as do the right thing by the Government and the taxpayer," said PM Lee, in reference to Mr Iswaran.

"He is under investigation. It is not a minor matter. He has not been convicted. He's not even been charged. Is it fair for me to say your pay goes to zero? I think it is not fair," he said.

Responding to a question by Workers' Party MP Dennis Tan (Hougang), PM Lee said Mr Iswaran would still receive his MP's al-

lowance, as the allowance is not at the discretion of the prime minister, unlike the ministerial salary.

To stop the allowance, Parliament would have to move a motion to suspend the MP from its service.

This has not happened in the past. MPs were put on leave of absence before the cases were settled.

4 WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INFORMAL AND FORMAL INVESTIGATIONS BY CPIB?

Responding to WP MP Gerald Giam (Aljunied GRC) on the difference between an "informal and quiet" investigation and a formal investigation, PM Lee said that in a quiet investigation, CPIB does not exercise all of its powers.

It does not arrest people and formally interview them. It makes inquiries and asks for information, but does not arrest and compel a person to answer its questions.

5 SHOULD THERE BE AN ADDITIONAL REPORTING LINE FOR CPIB?

Associate Professor Jamus Lim (Sengkang GRC) asked if the Prime Minister's Office had considered extending the institutional reporting line for the CPIB, beyond the prime minister and the president.

In response, PM Lee said he was very happy to know that Prof Lim appreciated a second key, and was seeking a third.

"I hope that it portends a change in your attitude towards the elected president and his custodial powers," he added.

But he disagreed with the need for more and more layers of checks and balances.

"The solution is to be found in honest people, with integrity and conviction and courage to make the system work with a reasonable degree of redundancy, so I don't have a single point of failure."

6 WILL THE CODE OF CONDUCT FOR MINISTERS BE REVIEWED?

Mr Zhulkarnain Abdul Rahim (Chua Chu Kang GRC) asked if the code of conduct for ministers in Singapore would be reviewed more consistently, with sanctions expressly stated.

Mr Chan replied that the code of conduct is currently gazetted, but sanctions are not spelt out.

He said the code will continue to be regularly reviewed.

He said that in Singapore's political culture, the ultimate sanction is not whether someone had committed a mistake and paid a certain fine.

"The ultimate sanction is what the public thinks of us as legislators, as part of the leadership team of this country, and we must do what we can to uphold the standards, whether the sanctions are codified or not codified."

Earlier, he replied to Ms Joan Pereira (Tanjong Pagar GRC) on potential uncertainties in the code of conduct.

Mr Chan said any code of conduct lays out the principles and guidelines for people to follow. It must be clear, but also not so prescriptive that it becomes paralyzing.

That itself must be complemented by good people who must abide by the spirit of the rules and not just the letter of the rules, he added.

Goh Yan Han