

4. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Chief Minister

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

We come to questions for the Chief Minister. Deputy Southern.

4.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Could the Minister inform Members to whom would a U.K. F.A.T.C.A. agreement apply and in what way do U.K. proposals currently not constitute a level playing field?

Senator I.J. Gorst (The Chief Minister):

I am sure that Members are fed up of me answering this question because I seem to have answered it on a number of occasions already this morning with regard to exactly the scope of the agreement that we will end up signing with the United Kingdom and I stand by that answer. Just in answering that... sorry, I have forgotten what the second part of the question was.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

In what way do current U.K. proposals not constitute a level playing field?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Yes, indeed. Thank you for that. I have already answered that as well. The U.S. F.A.T.C.A., as I indicated, is a global agreement and what the United Kingdom have currently proposed is not, it is discriminatory and just deals with the Crown Dependencies and the overseas territories.

[11:15]

4.2 Connétable D.J. Murphy of Grouville:

On 21st August an offer was made for the post of consultant in ophthalmology, eyes. The offer was accepted following the normal H.R. (human resources) process and the appointee and the States agreed and signed a contract. On 22nd November, despite the appointee having resigned his present position and made arrangements to move to Jersey, his family to Jersey, H.R. decided to withdraw the offer. Does this leave the States in a position of once again having to pay large sums in compensation?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

It is not my normal custom as Chairman of the States Employment Board to enter into answering questions about individual cases and I am not about to do so now.

4.3 The Connétable of St. Helier:

The Chief Minister has recently indicated that he believes that the States of Jersey Development Company could provide some of the money needed to pay for the purchase of Plémont. Could he clarify for us what he meant by that and reiterate his assurance previously made that the funding from proceeds of the States of Jersey Development Company will be targeted towards regeneration projects, particularly in the town centre?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Indeed, the Connétable called me earlier before the States sitting started and I think he sums it up in the final part of his question when he says particularly towards town. He is absolutely right in reminding Members that one of the great benefits of developing the waterfront and the work that the States of Jersey Development Company will do is that it will be generating profits to redevelop other areas of St. Helier and as he reminded me this morning, long overdue areas of development. He is absolutely right in that comment. With regard to Plémont it is trying to match one piece of land with another and while the timing as I have said before is an issue, it is trying to see whether money from the sale of land or the development of property cannot be used in due course to repay back the purchase price of the headland.

4.4 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

The Chief Minister would have heard the questions I had asked the Minister for Economic Development just previously, and I really wanted to ask the Chief Minister whether he believed that a 17 per cent reduction in non-locally qualified licences over the previous 3 years is a good enough figure. I am very concerned about inward migration. While there is this spare capacity in these licences and capacity being created all the time by those workers qualifying after 5 years, we are encouraging inward migration. I want to know, does the Chief Minister think that the time has come for us to be controlling inward migration through a work permit system rather than trying to do it through housing?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Yes, I did hear the comments of the Minister for Economic Development and the questioner would rightly expect there to be an element of tension between Housing, Economic Development and the Chief Minister's and Social Security Department because we are trying to work together to ensure that businesses have the employees that they need to succeed and grow; that we have good inward investment and that means that there is an element of migration needed because we want inward investment that is bringing job opportunities and investment into our economy. At the same time, as the Deputy knows, my top priority has been getting people back to work and that requires us to be reviewing, in a robust way, the existing licences. I believe that that tension is working and we are stripping out non-local licences. Inevitably, as the Deputy suggests, there is always room to improve.

4.5 The Connétable of St. John:

Last evening Members were circulated a news release by the Chief Minister's Department in relation to Plémont Holiday Village. Is it appropriate for the Chief Minister to use the Communication Unit in this particular way, given that although the proposition is in the Chief Minister's name, was this not in fact a private proposition brought by the Chief Minister solely? Thank you.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

No, I do not think it was. It was brought in my name as Chief Minister and head of the department and, as such, I see no problem with that particular news release being issued on my behalf by the Communications Unit.

4.6 The Connétable of St. John:

As the Minister mentions, on his behalf, can it be right spending public money in the way it is being spent by the Communications Unit given that there is a cost implication with staff and the like for a pet subject of the Minister?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

While I would not describe it as a pet subject, it is a subject that I feel passionately and strongly about and I know that others, and perhaps the Connétable is one, that feel passionately and strongly in the opposite direction. We should deal with the issues about whether it is right for this Assembly to safeguard the future of that headland and not about whether it is right that the Chief Minister uses the Communications Unit to communicate with States Members and the public at large.

4.7 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can the Chief Minister tell us whether any other E.U. State or whether the European Commission itself has asked the Island to sign up to similar or if not the same provisions to the U.S. F.A.T.C.A., and if so, what negotiations are taking place and is the U.K. facilitating these talks?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

As I have said in answer to a number of oral and written questions in the past, the O.E.C.D. and the E.U., U.S., U.K. part of the E.U. are all talking about and considering the potential for an international standard which has automatic exchange of information. There is no specific country that I am aware of but I am certainly aware that the E.U. as I said and the O.E.C.D. are considering these matters.

4.7.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

The Chief Minister did not answer the question. I was asking specifically whether any E.U. State has approached you for F.A.T.C.A. equivalents, not international agreements or O.E.C.D. or anything else. Have any States approached the Island, or the European Commission itself?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Perhaps I spoke for a little too long and explained myself a little too much because I did answer the question. I said I was not aware of any individual State having approached us.

4.8 Deputy M. Tadier:

Will the Chief Minister explain why the Verita recommendation to review what action the Government took when concerns came to light in 2008 has been omitted from the Council of Ministers' proposition to do with the Committee of Inquiry into Historic Child Abuse?

The Greffier of the States (in the Chair):

You cannot ask that, Deputy because you have already asked it.

Deputy M. Tadier:

Sorry, but maybe the Chief Minister can answer it this time.

4.9 Deputy J.M. Maçon of St. Saviour:

Following on from Deputy Hilton's question. Given that the Council of Ministers has been in place for well over a year, when will this Assembly have before it the new population policy?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

We are working to the same timetable that we said we were when we asked the Assembly to agree the Strategic Plan. The Deputy will be aware that the Statistics Unit had to do various reconciliations and gather various further bits of information, which I understand they now have, and we need to put together a consultation process with members of the public and with this Assembly. We are bringing forward, as the Deputy knows also, the new laws to allow the setting up of a population register so that we can understand the population level in more or less real time. So we are working to that same timetable of summer next year.

4.10 Deputy T.A. Vallois:

The Chief Minister talked of how good inward migration was. Could the Minister, therefore, advise or endeavour to advise how many more jobs have been created versus how many people we have brought into the Island to create those jobs and exactly what benefit it has made to the Islands as a whole?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

As I say, I am sure that the Deputy would not expect me to have such detail at my fingertips but I know that the Migration Advisory Group very carefully consider levels of inward migration and jobs to be created before giving approvals for the setting up of new entities and operations, and that is absolutely right. We cannot simply close the door, we must have an appropriately balanced approach. Yes, ensuring that jobs in our economy are created for people who are already here, we are doing that well. That ties in perfectly with the aims of the Social Security Department in getting people back to work and putting employers in touch with those who are

out of work. At the same time if people want to move to our community and are prepared to bring inward investment and create job opportunities in Jersey then we welcome them.

4.11 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

In an economic climate where we are seeing people with effective pay cuts really, the Chief Minister answered the Constable of St. John and talked about his passion for purchasing Plémont. Could he just clarify, is he willing to pay any price at all for his passion?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I seem to recall that the Deputy asked me a similar - if not himself then other Members have asked me - question at previous States sittings and I was quite clear that we needed to have the next valuation work in order that we can inform the decisions around what the price might be.

4.11.1 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

With respect, and I do not think I have asked the question, but perhaps it is because it is so difficult sometimes to get an answer. But what I am really getting at is I share a degree of the Minister's passion for this area however, it is the taxpayer paying for it, not him or me. So does that not inform the extent that the Chief Minister is willing to go to acquire this land at any price in this economic climate?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am surprised to hear the Deputy is not a taxpayer but perhaps he did not mean to say that. I have been quite clear and I recognise that a lot of the public concern around the purchase of Plémont is the cost and the fact that we will be asking the taxpayer to meet that cost. That is why it is important to have the valuation work done so that Members of this Assembly can be satisfied about what that reasonable cost is before they come to debate next week.

Deputy T.M. Pitman:

If I could just correct what I said. You know, I am not rich enough not to be a taxpayer, if I could just clarify that.

4.12 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Following on from the previous question. The Minister, I think, just said that population policy will be introduced in due course and follows the mechanics for enforcing policy. The words "horse and cart" come to mind. Does the Minister not consider that we should have a policy first and the mechanism to enforce it later?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

We obviously have existing legislation. I think it was a previous occupant of this post who liked to say: "We are where we are." Previous Assemblies have agreed the population legislation which is shortly to come into force. I see no need to delay or defer that.

4.12.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

The population legislation the Minister refers to is called Control of Housing and Work. It is the control mechanism and yet we have not got a new policy. Surely that is the wrong way around.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The Strategic Plan was quite clear with regard to the policy that the Council of Ministers and the Migration Advisory Group would be working.

4.13 Deputy M. Tadier:

Would the Chief Minister be willing to liaise with the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture and Minister for Social Security to make sure that potential mature students who want to access

further education are not prevented from doing so by having their income support claims withdrawn?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

This is always a difficult question because what the outcome is, is that one is expecting the taxpayer to fund education and at the same time fund benefits, and that is a difficult political decision to make. I am quite prepared to facilitate further discussions but I am sure those Ministers do not require my facilitation; they can quite easily speak to each other if there are concerns or problems that are being highlighted.

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4.13.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

In the interests of good governance and the fact that it seems that up until now because this problem has not been resolved in the past, the Minister for Social Security and Minister for Education presumably have not spoken to each other. Would the Chief Minister make sure that there is a joined-up policy so that mature students are not left behind when anyone under 19 cannot stay on income support and get full-time education but those who have perhaps missed their chance when they were younger cannot do so and they should not be penalised, even if that requires the creation of a new pod of money coming from somewhere in the States so that it can be funded while they are studying on perhaps one or 2-year courses?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

There is flexibility in the current policy but the nub of the issue comes down to that, which I have just explained, that the taxpayer would be funding an individual want to be on income support and (2) to have the cost of education funded and that is a difficult question to fairly address, dependent on what the value of the course is that the individual might wish to go on. I do not think it is quite right and perhaps the Deputy was not suggesting that there is an easy solution to it but I am sure that the Minister for Social Security and the Minister for Education, Sport and Culture are more than happy to sit and consider if there is an ongoing problem.