

3. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Minister for Economic Development: The Deputy Bailiff:

That concludes the oral questions. We come then to questions to Ministers without notice. The first question period is of the Minister for Economic Development.

3.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

As much as I welcome low-cost airlines coming to Jersey, I am very disturbed by reports of people being stranded at U.K. airports for anything from 5 hours to 5 days, with excuses from technical faults to operational reasons. People are then left to their own devices to try and organise their own way home. Will the Minister be taking the airlines to task over this totally unsatisfactory state of affairs?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf (The Minister for Economic Development):

Low-cost airlines operate and give passengers lower fares because they have lower operating costs. Different low-cost airlines organise themselves in different routing patterns and the patterns of the ones that have been particularly in the media recently are the so-called W patterns, which effectively start one day, move around and if there is a problem earlier on then it is very difficult for them to catch up, hence the very, very long delays. There is a debate to be had about the service levels of low-cost airlines. However, what I would say is that those low-cost operators are reducing fares and that is a benefit to the tourism economy and passengers. We note the issues, particularly in relation to one airline, and I am happy to have discussions with the airports authority on that particular issue.

3.1.1 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

The case I have in mind, Sir, is one that was recently in the local media, plus anyone who does seem to complain, the service they get is quite shoddy. They are given a leaflet with a telephone number circled, saying if they have any complaints, ring this number. Do you think we should come back to the old days where there is *esprit de corps* and service to the customer are paramount.

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I would just repeat the fact that low-cost operators operate low fares because they have lowered their costs and that sometimes has a commensurate dropping in the standards of the back-up facilities that are available. But I think the travelling public are well aware of that before they make their travelling choices. If they choose to take a seat at a very low fare with a low-cost operator, then there is going to be a commensurate level of service. A full-service airline, with full back-up, then you are going to have a different level of service. I think passengers are well aware of the service that they get.

3.2 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

I wonder, Sir, if the Minister could confirm the rental being paid for the new Jersey Tourism site, and could he also confirm that this rental is in contrast to the rent-free premises occupied by the previous Jersey Tourism Information?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I have not got the precise rental figure to mind, but this was a matter that was discussed by this Assembly - by the former Economic Development Committee - and, as far as my understanding is concerned is Economic Development is no worse off as a result of the move. What has been spent out of our budget is some of the refurbishment costs and indeed the Constable of St. Helier asked whether or not people were happy with the new Tourism Building and indeed the new Tourism Building is working very well, in my opinion.

3.3 The Connétable of St. Helier:

I wonder what the tourists thought of it. Could I ask the Minister, he was present at the Jersey Hospitality Association dinner last week - the 50th anniversary - and he would have heard the chairman appeal to politicians: "Do not forget tourism." Does the Minister not agree with me that it is time to review the allocation of Assistant Ministerial posts and consider the creation of an Assistant Minister with responsibility for the portfolio of Tourism?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

Tourism matters so much, I have kept the responsibility for myself. I did not want to send a message out that somehow, because I kept also the responsibility of the financial services, which I share with my Assistant Ministers, that suddenly Tourism was second class. Nothing could be further from the case. Indeed, my entire Ministerial team, with Harbours and Airports, regard the tourism industry as a priority and what I would do is I would ask the Constable to judge by our record - 4.4 per cent increase in passenger arrivals and a 1.9 increase year-to-date of tourist arrivals until the period to the end of August. Tourism matters. It is working. We are turning the corner.

3.3.1 The Connétable of St. Helier:

Just a supplementary, Sir, if I could ask what the Minister is going to do to get that message across to the leaders of the tourism industry, some of whom, I believe, do not share that confidence that their industry matters as much to the Economic Development Department as the Minister seems to think it does?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

It was very interesting because at the dinner there was a potted history of the Jersey Hospitality Association and indeed they are set up to be a lobby group, and it would be curious if they did not lobby and have problems with the way the government deals with things. As of the responsibilities to my Assistant Ministers, it is a shared responsibility and I regard Tourism as a shared responsibility with my Assistant Minister Maclean at Harbours and Airport. If I need to get the message across again to the J.H.A. (Jersey Hospitality Association) I happily am. I would also ask them to judge by results.

3.4 Senator L. Norman:

There is something like, I think, 8 months since the Privy Council found in favour of Jersey fishermen in their claim to continue to be allowed to operate in Guernsey waters. At the time, the Minister expressed the wish to enter into a fisheries management agreement with the Guernsey authorities. I am wondering if the Minister could say what progress has been made in the last 8 months and what results he expects to achieve at the meeting he has with his opposite number from Guernsey this coming Monday?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I am afraid that I have bad news for the Senator. The current situation is that the U.K. is in discussions with Guernsey to extend their territorial waters out to 12 miles. In parallel to those discussions, we have been trying to reach agreement with Guernsey for access in Guernsey waters. Of course, since the Privy Council determination, Jersey fishermen have had access to Guernsey waters. Unfortunately, a meeting that he correctly points out that was scheduled for Monday, I received notice yesterday has been cancelled by Guernsey. I am immediately writing to my opposite number in Guernsey to establish the reasons why. There does not appear to be any indication that there is a further meeting in the offing. I am very disappointed with that. I am going to be in communication with Guernsey hopefully later today and tomorrow to find out what the situation is. The fact is that we will also be keeping the U.K. informed of these developments.

3.4.1 Senator L. Norman:

I am wondering if the Minister has any indication as to why Guernsey should cancel this very important meeting and what comfort he can offer to Jersey fishermen that they will continue to be able to fish in waters they have been fishing for many generations?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

First of all, the fishermen in Jersey can rest assured that we continue to vigorously, as I know that the Senator did when he was part of Economic Development... we will vigorously defend the interests of Jersey fishermen. They currently have access to those waters and it is only going to be a situation if the U.K. extends those territorial waters out to 12 miles that there would indeed be an issue. I can also say that the reason that Guernsey has given for cancelling this meeting was that they are in discussions with the United Kingdom. My view is that we need to agree a way forward with Guernsey so that the U.K. can extend the territorial waters out to 12 miles. I am afraid I have not got a magic wand on this issue, all I can do is continue to work hard and get my department to work hard to seek resolution. I repeat, there is no issue at the moment with Jersey fishermen being excluded from Guernsey waters.

3.5 Deputy S. Power:

The Minister will be aware of the difference between the operational side and the regulatory side of Jersey aviation. I think the Minister will be able to confirm that a senior electronics engineer at the States of Jersey Airport has now been appointed liaison for the Civil Aviation Authority for the Island of Jersey. Can the Minister confirm that, as this is a regulatory role, this position cannot be based at the Economic Development Department because of the nature of the position and will he confirm where this officer will be based?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I am afraid I am not going to answer that question at the moment. I am not familiar enough with the recent issues on that. I will inform the Deputy about his question later on if he does not mind.

3.6 Deputy J.B. Fox:

Referring back to Deputy Lewis' question on low-cost airlines and the Minister's answer; would the Minister also bear in mind that many people on these low-cost airlines - and I had experience myself - pay full fare and on one occasion, on the last flight into Gatwick, a 75 year-old lady, who was one of 50, was stranded at the airport with no one to receive them or give them support and advice. She had paid a full fare, I forget, it was £200 or £250 and not even had a cup of tea. I think that, if the Minister would be so kind, when he is reviewing procedures of low-cost airlines, to bear in mind that not all the passengers are low-cost and sometimes do not have an option on methods of travel as it is the only airline that operates at that moment in time. I will just leave that one if I may by asking the Minister will he take it on board and come back to the House with a response please?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I do take that issue on board. As regards Gatwick, the advantage for people booking any seats on Gatwick is that there are so many services available and if one of the services on either airline falls or there is a problem with it, then the likelihood is there is going to be another service very soon thereafter. The Deputy's point is well made in respect of high level fares on low-cost airlines.

3.7 Senator L. Norman:

Following up from that, Sir, would the Minister accept that there is a significant difference between a low-cost airline and a low-fare airline?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I think that the boundaries are getting merged and indeed of our full service airlines there are some cracking fares that are available on them too. Effectively, the fluid pricing model is being used and that is, I think, helping our tourism numbers and our passenger numbers. I welcome the vigorous competition that exists on all of our routes.

3.8 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister confirm that on his visits to Rue des Prés Trading Estate he believes it projects the image of a dynamic, forward-looking and well organised entrepreneurial community?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I am familiar with Rue des Prés and I am familiar with the difficulties of my friend, the Minister for Transport and Technical Services and the resources that are there. I am also familiar with the aspirations of the Parish in having a clean-up of Rue des Prés. I do not think I am prepared to say whether or not I think Rue des Prés is a symbol of the entrepreneurial enterprise activities of Jersey but clearly there is a job of work to be done at Rue des Prés, and because of some of the ongoing issues of maintenance costs and the shared responsibility, I think, at Rue des Prés, we have not seen that. He cannot lay blame at my door for this particular issue.

3.9 The Connétable of St. Brelade:

In conjunction with the points brought up by Senator Norman with regard to the fishermen fishing off the coast of Guernsey, would the Minister confirm that he supports the insignia I notice painted on one of the local fishing boats yesterday, which has a large B with a donkey in the middle of it painted on its wheelhouse? **[Laughter]**

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I am afraid I have not seen that and I would not support that at all. I believe in friendly discussions with Guernsey and I believe that we should treat people in the respect that one wishes to be treated oneself and in that spirit I attempt to negotiate peacefully with Guernsey.

3.10 Deputy J.A. Martin:

As the Minister has brought up Rue des Prés, could he update the House on the lease on Jackson's Garage and is it still costing the States money and, if so, how much each year?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

The fact is, Sir, as the Deputy will know, it is a matter for Jersey Post that the lease was taken and the responsibilities of Jersey Post were moved from Economic Development into a limited liability company and that is now under the careful watch of the Treasury Minister. I am not ducking the issue, but I do not exactly know of that because it is now no longer part of E.D. (Economic Development).

3.11 Deputy K.C. Lewis:

Further to questions regarding the former Tourism Offices, would the Minister inform the Assembly whether contracts have been passed for the restaurant or coffee bar there, whether it is a U.K. franchise and who is the successful applicant?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I am not in the habit of ducking questions, but that is again not an issue for myself. The only administrative procedure that one would have to deal with Economic Development on that issue is a Reg. of Uns. licence. I am not aware of what the exact position is in relation to the former Tourism Building. I am aware that it is going to be the subject of development and a restaurant of some description has been agreed between W.E.B. and the tenant.

3.12 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister, in the light of his written answer to me at the last session, not agree, after a period of calm reflection, that the premature termination of his department's activities at Bath Street has resulted in a considerable misuse of public money insofar as the lease has several years left to run?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

Not in the slightest. The fact is that Bath Street was taken by a former Committee when they did not have a home. They needed a home and Bath Street has served Economic Development well in those intervening periods, as it does now. There are still people in Bath Street and we are in discussions in order to use those facilities for the remaining period of the lease that still exists.

3.12.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

If I can follow on, does that therefore mean, Sir, that an office that was leased in order to accommodate the administration of the department is no longer being used for that purpose and you are essentially having to come up with fill-space activities?

Senator P.F.C. Ozouf:

I think that all Members, and the Deputy would agree, that the previous ways in which the States managed and occupied property was unwise and inefficient. Economic Development running out of numerous sites is not conducive to teamworking and efficient working. However, from the transition to centralised facilities that we are having, there will be periods of time where buildings will be empty and that is something that we have to accept. The long-term is to make the States' occupation of property more efficient and that is what Economic Development are doing as part of the overall corporate plan.

The Deputy Bailiff:

I think that completes the time for the Minister of Economic Development.