

4. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Social Security

The Bailiff:

We come now to questions to Ministers without notice. The first question period relates to the Minister for Social Security and I invite Members to put questions to him.

4.1 Deputy J.J. Huet of St. Helier:

I would like to know, would the Minister advise us if there are any methods in place which will check identities of people coming into our Island from the U.K. or elsewhere to work when they go and get a social security card? Because from what I can understand, the British government seems to have slightly lost control of its prisoners, whether it be illegal immigrants; rapists, murderers; they do not seem to have any control of their lists at all, and I am worried that these people will end up in Jersey, and we have got no control either. I would like to know that nobody can just walk in and say their name is Joe Bloggs and it is somebody that is really on the 'Wanted List' in the U.K. I feel that we must protect our people here and I would like an assurance that we have got that covered and that we have no paedophiles, rapists, murderers or illegal immigrants working in Jersey.

Senator P.F. Routier(The Minister for Social Security):

I will do my best, Sir. The current procedure that we have in place at Social Security does require people to provide photographic I.D. when they come to register if it is a new registration. That is all people. Non-E.U. people would be required to have a work permit so, illegal immigrants should not really be able to register because they would have to have work permits from the Immigration Department for them to register at Social Security, so we would not permit that. If, for instance, somebody was to come into the department and not have a work permit, what the department would do is to phone the Immigration Department while that person was in the building and at the desk, and make comment to them so that there would be some immediate connection with the Immigration Department. We do have a really good liaison with the Immigration Department on these issues. With regard to people being refused access to a registration card if they have a criminal record coming from the U.K., that is an issue which is being debated. We have had a few questions within the House with regard to people coming into the Island and I do not believe there is much more that we can do than the Police are doing.

4.2 Deputy P.V.F. Le Claire:

I wonder if the Minister for Social Security could outline any plans or considerations in respect of pensions being linked to pay rises, as is being considered in the United Kingdom?

Senator P.F. Routier:

One of the very wise things that my predecessor did was to ensure that pensions are linked to earnings increases. It is quite a big issue for the U.K. because they have not linked their pensions to earnings in the past and they now realise the error of their ways. Our pensions in Jersey are considerably higher than the U.K. because we have maintained that link. So I do not believe there is any need to do that.

The Bailiff:

Minister for Housing, I think I must put you at the bottom of the list if there are Back-Benchers who wish to ask questions, first of all. Deputy of St. John?

4.3 Deputy A.D. Lewis of St. John:

In the light of the recent meeting held between the States of Guernsey and Jersey's Health Departments, at which there was discussed the issue of co-operation between both Islands, does the Minister have any plans to do the same between his department and his counterparts in Guernsey? If not, would he consider doing so?

Senator P.F. Routier:

My department and my relationship with the Minister of Social Security is quite strong. We do have contacts on a very regular basis and in fact, I met with both the Minister and the Chief Officer only 2 months ago, and we do have a very good working relationship and we do share ideas regularly.

4.4 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Before I commence my question, can I ask whether there is a difference between a Minister being refused the right to ask a question and an Assistant Minister being given the next slot?

The Bailiff:

I think the practice, Deputy, which has been developing, is that Ministers are, of course, permitted to question other Ministers, but if there are, and I use the word in a very broad sense, Back-Benchers who wish to question Ministers, they should be given priority.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Thank you, Sir, for that clarification. What consideration has the Minister given to the position of those Jersey residents who served in the Armed Forces, in light of the disadvantage that gives them in terms of their pension, ultimately, and in terms of their contribution record for such benefits as long-term incapacity allowance? What consideration will he, in his wide-ranging review of income support, give to the position of such people?

Senator P.F. Routier:

If the Deputy has a specific issue with regard to the people in the Armed Forces, I could probably respond to that far better than to a very general question that has been made. My understanding is that we do support people with credits to their social security to a certain amount, but that when it does come... I do recognise that when people are in the Armed Forces, they are paying contributions to the U.K. system. It is the same as when anybody goes to work outside of Jersey; they pay contributions to the social security system of the country in which they are working. So, that is the situation, and I hope they recognise that when they make that decision to leave the Island and make contributions to a different system. But when they do come to claim a pension in later years, their contributions that they have made in Jersey will be taken into consideration and also the contributions they have made in another country. But if the Deputy does have a specific issue that he wishes to raise with me, I would be very happy to address it.

4.5 Senator B.E. Shenton:

The inflation rate for pensioners is running higher than the core inflation rate. We read about high increases in electricity prices. In the U.K. there is a non-means tested winter fuel allowance. Has the Minister any plans to bring that in, in Jersey?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Comparing the benefits between the U.K. and Jersey is always a very difficult thing to do. When you go through the lists of the non-means tested benefits in the U.K. compared to the benefits we have in Jersey, for instance, their Christmas bonus is £10 whereas ours is roughly £80, from memory. Our pension rate is a lot higher than it is in the U.K., and so people need to take the whole picture into consideration. The new income support will have a component which will cover the cost of heating for those on income support. People who are on pensions - certainly, if their pension is not sufficient for them to be able to afford heating - well, certainly, the income support system will have to be in a position where it does recognise that and support people to that amount. I hope that answers your question.

4.6 Deputy A. Breckon of St. Saviour:

Are we quorate?

The Bailiff:

I was just putting the same question to the Greffier myself. The Greffier tells me we are just quorate. The next question is Deputy Breckon.

Deputy A. Breckon:

In view of the recent announcement in the U.K. regarding the minimum hourly rate of pay, could the Minister say if it is under review in Jersey, if there will be any consultation on this; if it is under review, who by, and from when the information will be in the public domain?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Was that about minimum rates of pay as opposed to minimum wage, because there is a slight difference? Well, certainly, minimum wage will be reviewed and consulted upon during the next few months. The Employment Forum will be going out to consultation and their recommendation will come to me in the autumn to announce a figure which would come into operation from April of next year. The minimum wage increases do apply generally from 1st April of each year and we will take into consideration the consultation which the Employment Forum undertakes.

4.7 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Would the Minister tell us what progress has been made in reference to the introduction of insurance for long-term residential care? Separately, Sir, has he had any feedback as to the financial support provided to deaf people or to the carers of deaf people, and if so, what is he doing about it?

Senator P.F. Routier:

Yes, Sir, the long-term care issue is certainly something which we will be addressing in the department. It is an issue which we really need to get to grips with over the next couple of years; really, because the major bulge in demographics which will come into effect is something that will happen in about 7 or 8 years. We really need to plan for it for that period and obviously, after that period it gets even more important. But, we are working together with the Health and Social Services Department to come forward with a long-term care issue. There are obviously, besides the policy about that care should be provided... there is also the mechanism fund that needs to be looked at. We have currently gone through a fiscal debate of how social security

contributions should be increased or not increased at the present time. Once the fiscal debate is completed and all those implications from that have taken place over a number of years, we will then be in a position, if need be, to perhaps look at using social security as a mechanism for the funding. But, at the present time, the need needs to be identified in conjunction with Health and Social Services and we need to be sure that we have a mechanism for funding it. With regard to the issues regarding deaf people, they will be considered along with all disabilities within the review we are doing of income support.

4.8 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Has the Minister met with the Minister for Home Affairs to discuss the issue of prisoners at La Moye being able to receive their prescriptions at the same cost as members of the general public and, if so, what progress has been made?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I have not met with the Minister for Home Affairs. I have not had a request to do that, as such. But, if that is an issue, certainly I will do that.

4.9 The Deputy of St. Martin:

Is the Minister aware of the implications of the Wool Report which did make the suggestion that the Health Minister and the Minister for Home Affairs discuss the issue of prescriptions?

Senator P.F. Routier:

I have to say I was not aware of that. It had not been drawn to my attention but certainly, as it has now, I will look into it.

Senator S. Syvret:

By way of information, could I just inform the Assembly that I recently agreed with the Minister for Home Affairs and Health and Social Services would take on responsibility for prisoners' health care. So, that is going to be done between the 2 departments.

The Deputy of St. Martin:

Could I just clarify the situation? The issue is separate. It is social security for prescriptions, not the health care; the actual payment of prescriptions, which I believe comes under Social Security.

Senator P.F. Routier:

It just occurs to me that depending on the length of the term that the prisoner was serving, if the contributions into the system have not been paid, it is the same as with anybody else; they would be unlikely to be able to qualify for prescriptions to be covered. It would only be a short-term prisoner who would then be in a position to claim off Social Security.

4.10 Senator T.J. Le Main:

Seeing I am recognised as a man of wisdom and vision [**Laughter**] many of you will have seen - I am answering the question leading up to the question, Sir - many of you will have seen 25 years ago when I attempted in this Assembly to have a PAYE and in 1988 I took a proposition to this Assembly seeking photographs on social security cards, which was accepted by this Assembly I withdrew it on the floor of the House. But nothing ever happened up until right

now, which I am very pleased about. The question is that one of the reasons for seeking clarification and a photograph was that the police were able to access the amount of criminally convicted crooks who were arriving on the Island; are these photographs available to Immigration and to the police in their daily business of running their activities? That is the question.

Senator P.F. Routier:

All that our department does is to require a certified photograph of somebody coming to register at Social Security. It has to be, obviously - whether it is a forgery or whatever - down to the provider of that information - to that certificate or passport or identity card - to verify it. I can only rely on that, Sir.

The Bailiff:

Thank you. That concludes the first question period.