

5. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Chief Minister

The Deputy Bailiff:

If there are no other questions for the Minister for Housing then we come on to the questions for the Chief Minister

5.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Given the laying of a proposition on the future of the States Appointments Board, could the Chief Minister confirm that this proposition has got the full support of the current Appointments Board?

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

A very good question, indeed. I have been written to at the end of last week outlining concerns by members of that board and I have asked for a meeting with them at the States Employment Board this coming Friday, at which point I will know fuller what their concerns and whether we are able to address them or not. The Member who asked the question will know that I have already deferred that particular proposition because I have laid an amendment after consideration of another Member's question in this Assembly anyway.

5.1.1 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Can the Chief Minister confirm that none of those members have resigned and that their letter did not contain any issues that could not be dealt by good sense and negotiation?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I hope that is the case but I will find that out when I meet with them on Friday.

5.2 Connétable A.S. Crowcroft of St. Helier:

Does the Chief Minister support the Minister for Economic Development's proposals in P.76 to further liberalise Sunday trading, especially given the lack of information about the effect on the retail sector workforce in the proposition?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Much as I would like to answer questions about the forthcoming debate, I think I will have to leave that for the actual debate so Members will see what my positions are when I come to the vote. I think the Connétable raises some important considerations and the Council of Ministers have very robust debates around where protection for workers, protection of our community as it now is, with regard to the creation of jobs and support for the retail sector. I think it is fair to say that we did not meet eye-to-eye on this issue.

5.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Will the Chief Minister comment on the proposed referendum for electoral reform.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am not quite sure what comment you would like me to give. I arrived at my desk this afternoon and see that there is an amendment to that referendum question. I know that others have been considering an amendment to it as well. I have had meetings during the course of the day and it has been put to me in one of those meetings that does this Assembly respect democracy as a result of the decision that we took arising from the last referendum. I think what we need to make certain is that when we agree the referendum question, if we are going to agree it, that we agree it with a strong majority because we do not want to be in the same position that we were in previously. Therefore, there might need to be some compromise

about what question are we going to be able to put to the electorate and we need to have a question that we will be able to draw clear conclusions from and not fudge again as we have done in the past.

5.3.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

What might the nature of that question be? One that clear conclusions can be drawn from? Is he saying that the current question put forward, for example, the public vote against, then no clear direction will be available, even in fact if they were both brought?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

That is right. The Chairman at P.P.C. (Privileges and Procedures Committee) told me, I think, largely interpreted to “sit down and read his report” when I raised this question, but the reality is that I do not think the nature of the constituencies that a single member might represent is clearly defined and I am not sure that the public would understand what that were. I think perhaps I have more in common with the now questioner and think that if we are going to move from our current system, first of all, we need to think about what boundaries individuals might represent before we were able to move to a single type of member.

5.4 The Connétable of St. John:

Given the Chief Minister voted against Deputy Tadier’s proposal to give sufficient time for questions earlier in the afternoon, how does this sit with the Minister who pays lip service to Scrutiny and Back-Benchers over many months when he says he is in fully inclusive government?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Then there is a correlation between the 2. If we are to finish the business, which I think everyone on the Assembly wants us to do, there is a good mix of Ministerial and Executive business and Back-Bench business and all need to be given appropriate time and due consideration. There were only 9 questions; I think 4 minutes per question seems reasonable. I think we perhaps have done it in slightly over that, or around about that anyway, and, therefore, by default I think that is what the Assembly has got whether it voted for it or not. I do not see a correlation at all. I think that Scrutiny have performed well in this last 2½ years. We see that again with the Scrutiny Panel’s review of C.A.M.H.S. and the action that Ministers are now taking arising from that. I do not accept the comment of Connétable of St. John, he seems to be living in the past where Ministers did not respect Scrutiny and did not act upon Scrutiny reports, and that is not the way that it is been during this term of office.

5.5 Deputy N.B. Le Cornu of St. Helier:

Would the Chief Minister confirm that he will be inviting observers to the Island’s first general election in October and who he has in mind to be present as observers?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure it is within my remit to do so. I would support election observers and I have written to the Chairman of the Privileges and Procedures Committee in that regard and to the President of the Assembly. I think they are awaiting ... I think they now might have advice and I think I might have received a copy of that advice at the end of last week but I have not been able to consider it. I have written back to them again in light of their response to me, so it is in action.

5.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Is the Chief Minister fully in agreement with the words of his Minister for Treasury and Resources who was suggesting that there was an open door to migration for the finance sector in particular?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I was not at the briefing where these comments were supposed to have been made but I do not know if there is any difference between myself and the Minister for Treasury and Resources, and the Interim Population Policy is quite clear. We need inward migration to stimulate and grow our economy and create jobs for those who are already here and we say that we will do that by accepting high economic value immigration into our community. Even by the Deputy's calculation of high economic value, he must admit that that means that financial services bring that high economic value into our community.

[16:00]

5.6.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does he further accept that the arrival of such high value employees will cause an extra demand on the housing situation in the Island when we already have 700 people waiting to be housed properly?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

We do have a waiting list for housing in our community and that is one of the reasons why we have transformed the way that we deliver social and, perhaps we are using the term now, affordable housing. That is one of the reasons why we went to the market and got a fantastic rate on a Jersey bond. About £250 million is going to be put into renovating and building new homes to help meet that demand. We are absolutely committed to ensuring that that demand is provided for. The Assembly in due course during the Island Plan debate is going to be asked to rezone sites to help on the supply side of providing homes. I hope that the Deputy, in the light of his question, will be supporting those amendments.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

The Minister did not answer the question at all. He went all around it, as usual, but did not answer the question.

The Deputy Bailiff:

He has given you quite a long answer and you have to make of it what you will. Deputy Le Hérissier.

5.7 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Apropos of my earlier question to the Assistant Chief Minister, could the Chief Minister confirm that he is entirely happy with the 325 cap, given that there will undoubtedly be a massive demand from the construction industry until Social Security's programmes for training people in construction are well advanced? Can he confirm that the 325 cap is quite adequate in order to cope with this demand for construction labour?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The Deputy likes to use the emotive word "cap". You will see from the Interim Population Policy that it is a Planning Assumption and so he is questioning me. I hope he has been speaking to his Minister because I was questioning his Minister last week at the Back-to-Work group because this is an issue that we are fully ... that Ministers are aware of, that the Ministers that sit on the Back-to-Work group are aware of. I subsequently met with construction industry representatives and we talked about this issue as well, so I am going to

be accused of giving a long answer. The Back-to-Work team is providing training for 200 people to get into construction. They announced that only last week. The questioner's own department has a plan for a new skills centre. I have challenged them and I have challenged Treasury to bring that plan forward because that is going to be absolutely critical in dealing with this difficulty that the construction industry are going to face. When I think what the demand is going to be and what the spend is going to be over the next 3 or 4 years, we are aware it is a problem. We are putting in place actions to ensure that we mitigate that problem but, at the same time, there will need to be some inward migration to deliver some of the larger projects. The question is how are we going to do deliver that and we suspect we might be able to do it through named licences in the short term.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy Higgins, you are running out of time.

5.8 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Just following on the Chief Minister's last answer, if I remember correctly, I think it was 2 months ago, the number of people who work in the construction trades who are unemployed was 187, which we all know is totally inadequate if there is going to be a lot of building going on in the Island. The Minister has mentioned that a skills centre is going to be built, that could take 2 or 3 years, and so on. Will he admit that because they have not taken steps before, we are going to have an influx of construction workers to fill the vacancies that are there? Will he not admit that is the case?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not think you can accuse anybody in this Government of not taking steps to do with the unemployment issue, to do with the skills gap and shortage. We have taken, I believe, more steps than any previous Government but we do not sit on our laurels and say there are no issues coming in the next year, the next 2 years. We are putting in place a programme to ensure that we can mitigate the changes that we know are happening in the construction sector. The Deputy says it is going to take 2 or 3 years. I have told the Education and Treasury Departments that that is not good enough. The spend on the new skills centre needs to be brought forward and needs to be delivered during the course of the end of this year and the start of next year. We need to get more people into training for construction. Let us not forget we have got Trackers as well. We spoke to the construction industry representatives and they absolutely accept that Trackers can be expanded. They think there is another about 100 per cent capacity in their industry where they could take those people off. They are working with us with the training of the 200 people. The Deputy needs to look at what we are doing and work with us to deliver on these programmes and deal with the challenges that we face ahead rather than looking to the past and how things have been dealt with in the past.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Chief Minister, you have absolutely risen to the bait of thinking you could talk out time but I have made a mistake and there are an extra few minutes to come. **[Laughter]**

5.8.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Just following on from the Chief Minister's answer, I am fully prepared to support him for the future; I want to see our people trained and trained well. However, will he tell us how many people were trained in construction and engineering? I have asked this question in this House a number of times; I have never had a satisfactory answer over the last year or whatever. How many people have been trained to fill the needs that we knew were coming?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

You would not expect me to have those numbers off the top of my head but what I can say, and what I have said in this Assembly before, and I have said to departments and the Back to Work Ministerial team, is ensuring that we improve it. It is not enough. We have got 57 people in Tracker schemes now, I think largely in construction. It is not enough. We need to double that; we need the new Skills centre to be brought forward to deliver more skills. One thing I can say to him is whatever that number is as a result of the programme that we announced last week, there are 200 more people going to be trained over the next few months with the support of Social Security and the Back to Work team. I say to him again - and I am not trying to talk out time because I think I have got plenty of minutes left yet - that rather than looking to the past and what has happened he should look at what we are doing and support what we are doing.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Will the Minister circulate the figures, please?

The Deputy Bailiff:

You have been asked whether you will circulate the figures, Chief Minister.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am surprised they have not been circulated already if the Deputy has asked for them, but I will undertake to do that.