

2015.10.20

3.2 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of St. Helier of the Chief Minister regarding the development of a population policy:

Could the Deputy Chief Minister update the Assembly on what progress, if any, has been made towards bringing forward a full population policy?

Senator A.K.F. Green (Deputy Chief Minister - rapporteur):

The Assistant Chief Minister was very clear on this in July. In our first year the Council of Ministers has been focused on bringing a Strategic Plan and a Medium Term Financial Plan. Now we can continue to work to reshape our public services, to deliver sustainable public finances, and set long-term policy direction. The population policy is a critical element of the Government's priorities and this week or later this week the Chief Minister will be inviting Members to a briefing to provide more detail of what we have done and how we intend to progress.

3.2.1 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

Surely population is the most important of our long-term policies we need to be looking at, given that it will have an impact on virtually every single penny that the Government spends or raises. So could I ask the Deputy Chief Minister then in these discussions will say to Members they have an opportunity to propose ways that we can reverse what has been up until now the consistent track record of this Government where it has missed every single one of its population targets over the past few years?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

It is not as simple as the Member would have us believe. It is a balance between providing people to work in the economy, be that at the lower end although this Government's policy is that we should target our scarce resources at those that are going to produce the greatest income, and thereby increase our productivity. It is not as simple as the Deputy suggests. We have seen very clearly that the number of jobs in the community have grown - grown by 800 in the last year - and I think it is quite important that we ensure that we have a population that can support our ageing population as we go forward. But of course we need to make sure that we have the right people in the right jobs increasing productivity.

3.2.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

How successful, in the Minister's estimation, has the present policy been of targeting towards the higher earning end of migration rather than lower end given that 450 of the 800 jobs created in the last 2 years were zero-hours jobs?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

The Deputy is muddling up 2 different things. I know that the H.A.W.A.G. (Housing and Work Advisory Group) group that meet regularly to look at the applications that come in from companies for support for workers frequently, regularly, challenge and dismiss at the lower end appropriately and try to ensure that we only bring those scarce resources in at the higher end. That said, they also challenge to ensure that employers are doing their bit to ensure that local people are encouraged to reskill and train up to the higher end jobs as well.

3.2.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Has the Deputy Minister examined and analysed the data given by the Stats Office about those new jobs and, if he has, has he noted that they are largely in fairly low-paid areas, those 450 jobs, rather than high paid, and does he believe that his policy is being successful?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

I believe our policy is cautious and been reasonably successful. It is very popular to knock zero-hour contracts but they have a useful place in the community. For example, zero-hours contracts for bank nursing is a good thing. Zero-hours contracts for supply teachers is a good thing. Zero-hours contracts, I heard the Farmers Union talking the other day, has benefited those seasonal workers in the agricultural industry, so it is very easy to knock it. Appropriate use of zero-hours contracts I can accept is the right thing. Inappropriate is wrong. But the examples I have given are totally appropriate.

3.2.4 Deputy J.A. Hilton of St. Helier:

Can the Minister explain why he believes the open door policy granted to all workers in the European Union and E.E.A. (European Economic Area) countries is the best immigration policy for Jersey and does he not believe the time has come for Jersey to be more selective in whom it attracts to the Island in order we extract best value and productivity from those workers?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

I think we are straying into the next question but I am happy to talk about that. In terms of who the open door policy, as the Deputy calls it, we know very well that those who hold European Community passports have a right to reside in the Island providing they live in either qualified accommodation and take unqualified posts or firms have licences. I am advised there is nothing we can do about that. That is where we are under Protocol 13. The trick is, I think what the Deputy wants me to say, is that we would consider bringing in work permits. I think H.A.W.A.G. are virtually doing that inasmuch as they ensure that we target the jobs... that we get the best value out of the jobs that they give licences for and that they are always conscious of the fact we need to increase our productivity. So they are looking at the effect on the economy and our productivity whenever they give out a licence.

3.2.5 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

I am not convinced by that answer because we all know that population increased by 1,200 people over the previous 2 years and from June last year to June this year 250 new registered jobs were created over and above the entitled to work people who came out of the register to work into entitled to work. So these jobs are being created and, generally speaking, they are low value jobs. So Jersey does operate an open door policy to anybody who wishes to come here and basically they can find work and accommodation. Does he not agree with that?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

Not entirely, but I do accept that we do need to have people here that can do the jobs that need to be done. We do need to have some... and I hate the term "low value". I thought as a Government we had banned that term, but we do have to have some people working in industry such as agriculture and tourism. If the local people are not going to take those posts up we need to ensure that we can support those parts of the industry that are important to our economy. They may not be important in terms of generating income in some cases but certainly, if we take tourism, it is very important in terms of maintaining our communication links. That is what gives us the connectivity with the airports that we have got. So it is not as black and white as the Deputy suggests.

3.2.6 Deputy A.D. Lewis:

Would the Minister agree that any job increases in the current world economic cycle for most economies should be celebrated, not condemned? Surely what we should be more concerned about, which is a common problem with small island nations, is the risk of depopulation?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

I quite agree and when you look at some of the other economies where they are suffering from depopulation, what that effectively means, because they have got the same ageing profile as we have, in that years to come their grandchildren, their children, less of them working, we will be supporting more people who are retired. So it is a good thing to have appropriate jobs, but what we need to do is to make sure that those jobs are the ones that not only support our community but increase our productivity and therefore economic activity.

3.2.7 Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier:

Following up on the Assistant Chief Minister's answer to Deputy Southern, he mentioned that he thought zero-hours contracts were beneficial for bank nurses. In the U.K. the N.H.S. (National Health Service) is struggling with a fantastic bill for bank nurses. In fact would he say it would be far better to have more nurses rather than using agencies where they are paying not only for the nurse but also for the agency services?

[10:00]

Senator A.K.F. Green:

Clearly the Deputy does not understand the difference between a bank nurse and an agency nurse. A bank nurse is a nurse on our payroll who is called in to cover when we have periods of maternity leave or sickness or holiday. Agency nurses are exactly what they say they are. They work for somebody else and they cost a lot of money. That is why we have bank nurses.

3.2.8 Deputy M. Tadier:

The Deputy Chief Minister said something quite insightful or rather which gave us an insight into the thinking of the Council of Ministers when he said: "I am told there is nothing we can do about it" when asked a question by Deputy Hilton about population and limiting it in terms of the European Union. Does the Deputy Chief Minister not think that this is the wrong way round? That he should not be relying on presumably civil servants to tell him what can and cannot be done policy-wise but it is up to politicians who are elected to tell civil servants what they wish to be done and say: "Go away and find 2 or 3 ways for us to do this"?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

The Deputy is twisting my words. He knows full well this does not come from the Civil Service, but comes from advice that we have been given in the past. Under Protocol 13 I believe it is, that those who hold European passports have a right to come to the Island. How they reside and how they work is what we control. He knows very well and I am not going to rise to that bait.

3.2.9 Deputy M. Tadier:

The Senator will also know that there are other jurisdictions with relationships to the E.U. (European Union) which do have limits and work permits, *et cetera*, which can function quite well and that just simply requires initially a change of approach from the Government, so can the Minister confirm that if there was political will there we could look to have work permits if it was thought to be politically desirable and that the obstacles that he talks about are not insurmountable?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

What I said right at the beginning is that this Chief Minister will be inviting Members to come along and listen in more detail to what is to be done and discuss the way forward. That is as far as I am prepared to go on that one.

3.2.10 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I think the Hansard will show that my previous question that I asked did not produce anything that even closely resembled an answer, so I am going to give the Deputy Chief Minister a final go to see if he can produce one. Yes, we accept population control is a difficult issue. Yes, we accept that we need something that strikes the right balance between what will give us economic growth and what will not produce any strain on public services. But whatever the actual outcome is, it matters nothing if the population policy is a brilliant policy if we are not hitting it; if we are reaching above that it will not be doing what it is meant to be doing. So what assurances will the Deputy Chief Minister give us that when we do come forward with a full population policy it will be something that is worth the paper it is written on, that it will be achieved, and what opportunities will there be for States Members to suggest ways that this can be done?

Senator A.K.F. Green:

I suggest that the Deputy takes up the invitation of the Chief Minister and attends the meeting and then he will understand the way that we want to take this forward, and also have an opportunity for his input.