

23.07.17

3 Deputy M.R. Scott of St. Brelade of the Chief Minister regarding absences of the Chief Minister in States Meetings (OQ.153/2023)

Will the Chief Minister advise what process or criteria of prioritisation she uses to determine the circumstances in which she considers it acceptable to be absent from a States meeting, including whether any such process also takes into account the potential absence of the Deputy Chief Minister from the same meeting?

The Deputy Bailiff:

Deputy Gorst, are you answering this question on behalf of the Chief Minister?

Deputy I.J. Gorst of St. Mary, St. Ouen and St. Peter (Assistant Chief Minister - rapporteur):

It has always been the case that from time to time Members across the Assembly are absent on days when the Assembly is sitting. That of course includes Ministers who may be absent on States business representing the Island or for other reasons. In this instance, the Deputy Chief Minister is away on a long-planned absence and the Chief Minister was unexpectedly invited to attend the Women Deliver 2023 conference in Rwanda as a female head of government. The Chief Minister makes her decisions based on what she and her advisers consider to be in the best interests of Jersey.

Deputy M.R. Scott:

I do not believe that answers my question. I am asking about process or criteria in order to make such a decision. Just saying that it is on the basis of advisers is not enough.

The Deputy Bailiff:

What aspect of your question do you not think was responded to by Deputy Gorst?

Deputy M.R. Scott:

The bit that mentions process or the criteria.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Do you want to address that, Deputy Gorst, insofar as you have not already?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Indeed, happy to do so. I thought it was quite clear that the Chief Minister makes her decisions based on what she believes is in the best interests of Jersey. I believe that her decision to travel to this conference is in the best interests of Jersey.

4.3.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will the rapporteur state whether the long-planned absence includes a long-planned absence on a States meeting day?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As far as I am aware it does ... I am not quite sure of the Deputy Chief Minister's return to the Island. But he is away with his family having come to the end of their examinations. As Members will know, during the course of the Deputy Chief Minister's presence in this Assembly he has very infrequently, if at all, missed an Assembly sitting.

4.3.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Would the rapporteur inform Members whether or not this long-planned absence does cover a States Meeting day, i.e. tomorrow?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I think I just answered that.

The Deputy Bailiff:

Yes, I think you did answer that.

4.3.3 Deputy S.G. Luce:

It is my belief that Back-Benchers only get a few opportunities to question the Chief Minister in public and those happen most frequently during questions without notice. The Deputy Minister says that the Chief Minister thinks it is in the best interests of the Island for her to go away but would he not agree with me that it is in the best interests of the Island for her to stay where she is elected and answer questions from Back-Benchers?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Let us be clear, the Chief Minister is Chief Minister of Jersey at the will of this Assembly 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year. She is still Chief Minister. She is still performing and making decisions in the best interests of Jersey. The reality is, of course, like many other places around the globe, we also have this process in place where somebody can act on-Island in the head of government's absence. It is quite clear to me that this is a Women Deliver conference 2023. It takes place every 3 years. It is an honour that the Chief Minister has been invited and that Jersey is being represented by the Chief Minister. I think we would all agree it is far better that the Chief Minister goes there and I make a not very good job of answering questions than I go there and she stays here and answers questions.

4.3.4 Deputy S.G. Luce:

I do not dispute that the Chief Minister may well be doing a good job on behalf of the Island in Rwanda but, can I ask the Deputy, whether it is necessary for the Chief Minister to be absent this afternoon? This conference lasts all week. The States sitting is going to last all week. Was there not a compromise situation that could have been found here?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

We can always find compromises. The Chief Minister travelled over the weekend in her own time. That meant that she could be there for the opening ministerial forum, in which she was able to participate and speak. I think that that was the right choice.

4.3.5 Deputy L.V. Feltham of St. Helier Central:

As the Acting Chief Minister/rapporteur - I am not quite sure what to say - has said that an assessment has been made that this particular trip is in the best interests of Jersey, and that is an assessment he agrees with. Could he explain to the Assembly what benefits are expected out of this particular trip and what the outcomes will be for my constituents and the constituents of the rest of the Assembly?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As the Deputy knows, diplomacy is an art form and building relationships and representing Jersey in the diplomatic field can but not always have those tangible sort of outcomes that she is indicating. However, I can confirm that the Chief Minister has made good progress in regard to the B.I.T. (Bilateral Investment Treaty) and moving that forward with Rwanda, and got a shortened timescale in that regard. She has also got commitments from the Finance Minister of Poland about an updating to our double taxation agreement. All of those might sound slightly strategic but ultimately they give direct benefit to all Islanders and all of her constituents.

4.3.6 Deputy L.V. Feltham:

My understanding is a number of people are attending this particular conference online and also, as we are aware, people do do a lot of work now online and remotely. Why was the decision taken that the Chief Minister could not have these conversations at another time and could not participate in this particular conference remotely?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Having attended such international events, both online and in person, I can absolutely say without a shadow of a doubt that the benefit to Jersey is far greater when one is sitting, standing, face to face and communicating directly with individuals as opposed to simply across a computer screen.

4.3.7 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

In answer to a question from Deputy Southern, Deputy Gorst seemed to suggest that he did not know when the Deputy Chief Minister was due to be returning to the Island. Given that Deputy Gorst is serving as Acting Chief Minister because both the Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister are away, does he mean to suggest that he does not know how long he is Acting Chief Minister for?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As far as I am concerned hopefully as little and short a time as possible. I am sure, Sir, that you and every Member of this Assembly is hoping the same from the tenor of the questions. As I understand it, I will be Acting Chief Minister until the end of Thursday. What I cannot quite recall is whether the Deputy Chief Minister returns to the Island then or it is the Chief Minister, it is one or the other and he will be shut of me in this role.

[15:15]

4.3.8 Deputy R.J. Ward:

As chair of the C.P.A. (Commonwealth Parliamentary Association) I have no problem with people attending any States business; however, I will ask a question about prioritisation of missing States Assemblies. Given that there are some significant propositions coming through about La Collette waste and land licensing, which I will note lost by one vote last time it was brought to this Assembly, does the Acting Deputy Assistant Chief Minister rapporteur **[Laughter]** ... sorry, I have lost track of what the terminology, does that acting person feel that perhaps this prioritisation was not taken into account?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

I think that was a question to someone else. **[Laughter]**

Deputy R.J. Ward:

Indeed it was but unfortunately they are not here. The serious question about prioritisation is there. Does the Council of Ministers consider when a piece of legislation from Ministers within the Council of Ministers is being brought forward, if 2 voting Members of this Assembly are missing, is that really the way to lead the Island? Is that a better way to do things?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Of course those issues are part of the consideration before any Minister decides to take up, in this instance, a unique invitation which was offered to the Chief Minister to represent Jersey in this positive way. The Chief Minister has, I think, confidence - and I hope this is borne out in the work that Ministers are bringing before the Assembly at this sitting - that there will be sufficient support for those proposals.

4.3.9 Deputy M. Tadier:

Further to my party leader's question about how long he will be acting as Chief Minister, is it not the case that the Deputy has already been acting as Chief Minister for one year now and that the actual answer is that he is going to be acting for another 3 years? **[Laughter]**

The Deputy Bailiff:

Was that a question?

Deputy M. Tadier:

It is and I think it is, with all the laughter, a political question.

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

As the Deputy knows, there is a lot of acting involved in politics, and he is a fine example of it, and I take my lessons from him. The reality is that I am honoured that this Assembly voted for me to be the Minister for Treasury and Resources in this Government and that is a job I take very seriously and I hope to continue to serving this Assembly in that role for the remaining 3 years.

Deputy M.R. Scott:

Can I just point out I did not have my first supplementary because I was asking a point of clarification and you went immediately to Deputy Southern?

The Deputy Bailiff:

Well I thought that because you effectively did get an answer to the question you were effectively asking the same question twice but, in any event, it is now your final supplementary. Do you have a question to ask?

4.3.10 Deputy M.R. Scott:

Yes. I just wondered if the Acting Chief Minister who was the uncontested Minister for Treasury and Resources, who also is acting as Minister for External Relations perhaps, I am not sure, but anyway if he knows, given that we all gave an oath to attend States Meetings, and given the title of the conference, Women Deliver, whether the Chief Minister will be explaining how exactly she is delivering as Chief Minister by not being here, not attending question time, not being here for the propositions that are being brought before the States Assembly and whether she might have considered other options such as another female Minister taking her place given what I do believe is the importance of her position?

Deputy I.J. Gorst:

Seriously, I have no doubt that the Chief Minister weighed these issues carefully because the point about the Chief Minister being questioned on questions without notice at every States sitting is a well-made point. The Chief Minister balances, and I support her in this decision, what is in Jersey's best interests. I believe that her attendance at this prestigious conference of female leaders from around the globe, not only from government but charities and civil society organisations, is a terribly important one and it is one that the Chief Minister is uniquely in a position to show off Jersey in a very positive light.