

2016.06.14

3.11 Deputy G.P. Southern of the Chief Minister regarding proposals to cut his departmental revenue expenditure: [9495]

I draw the Chief Minister's attention to the form of words precisely. Will the Chief Minister inform Members whether he has under consideration proposals to cut his departmental revenue expenditure by up to £8.8 million with the loss of up to 36 posts over the period 2016 to 2019?

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

This Government is investing in health, education, infrastructure and economic growth while aiming for balanced books over the economic cycle. To ensure this spend, we are restructuring our organisation and reprioritising existing spending. This of course will mean reducing staff in some areas; however, we will be employing more staff in priority areas like health and education. The figures that the Deputy refers to, and those released in the media last week, are not accurate but we will be publishing accurate detailed figures in the M.T.F.P. Addition on 30th June.

3.11.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Included in the figures that I produced, whether accurate or not **[Laughter]**, there is a proposal, I believe, to cut 2 posts from the Statistics Unit. Does the Minister not think that this would be an extremely short-sighted cut given the changes that society is going through and the economy is going through and we ought to have the most accurate and best data we can on which to base our decisions? **[Approbation]**

Senator I.J. Gorst:

It is this Government and previous governments... and I think it was Senator Ozouf that really started the critical momentum in ensuring that we had proper statistics advice, a proper funded Statistics Department, proper economic advice and a proper funded Economics Department. I think we can be proud of the advice that they give us but every single department across the States is being asked to consider reprioritisation and to work more efficiently and effectively. There are proposals in the area that the Deputy suggests, as there are proposals right across the Government. It is too early to give the full details. Those details will be given on the 30th but if we can bring areas of expertise together and produce efficiencies with an agreed change in the service delivery, then surely that is a good thing.

3.11.2 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I know it is an old-fashioned tradition, but could the Chief Minister consider answering the question that was asked by Deputy Southern which is: is the cut to 2 posts in the Statistics Unit a short-sighted cut? Since that is now in the public domain and we know that the Scrutiny report which came out has said that the Government has not done adequate impact assessments and the cutting of posts in the Statistics Unit will infringe on the Government's ability to do adequate impact assessments in future, would he not agree that it is time to not go ahead with this proposal seeing as there is still time for the M.T.F.P. to be published? Will he agree to take that as an idea out of it so that we can have decent impact assessments and information in future?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I did answer the question. The Deputy is not correct to say that I did not. Should I be expected to answer every piece of misinformation that he then put into his supplementary question? I do not think so. Every single department and that includes the Statistics Unit. I will repeat it so he can have it repeated again. Every single department is being asked to consider where it can make changes,

where it can operate more efficiently and effectively and the details of those changes will be published on 30th June. The Deputy knows that. I ask him to be patient a little longer.

3.11.3 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

The Chief Minister knows patience is not something I am particularly good at, so how does he reconcile saying that the information put out by Deputy Southern is both inaccurate and at the same time say that it is a perfect possibility that these 2 posts will be cut? Will they be cut or will they not be cut? If he is of the view that they would like to cut them, would he reconsider it, given the information that was put out by Scrutiny about insufficient information about government measures which are constantly being put forward?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The Deputy may feel he has got insufficient information but Ministers do not feel that. The very Economics Unit that I was praising working with the Statistics Unit are doing the work that the Deputy suggests is not being done and has not been done. Members will see that work on 30th June or thereafter when we are publishing the details of the proposals. It is not right for the Deputy to say as he has. There are proposed changes right across the States. There are proposals to bring functions together where they might be carrying out similar functions to create efficiencies without detriment to service. There may be some changes in service but I think that when the Members of this Assembly see the changes that we are proposing they will support them. More importantly, they will see that what we are doing is creating better value for the taxpayer and that we are curtailing the growth of the cost of government to the benefit of future generations.

3.11.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

When the Chief Minister says that every single department is being asked to look at making cuts, he forgot to say that even if those cuts end up being a false economy in the long term, how can the Chief Minister get to his feet singing the praises of the Statistics Unit while at the same time knowing full well that a cut of 2 posts in that department - which I dare suggest are already over-stretched anyway - will not result in statistics which are being currently provided seeing a service reduction?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

We are working to deliver sustainable changes to our public service. That is why we spent a lot of time, that is why we are virtually there but we are continuing to refine and make sure that the changes that we are making are sustainable in the long term. If we take the Statistics Unit, the Deputy would think there are only statisticians in the Statistics Unit. There are not, there are other statisticians right across the States. Surely, as we are asking everybody, we should ask whether we cannot work in a more co-ordinated way to enhance the delivery to the public and of course in that particular area, continue to enhance the information that that unit provides, not only to government and to the States Assembly, but importantly to the public at large.

3.11.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

The Chief Minister says that he wants to make sure that these proposals are sustainable. Sustainable, of course, in his opinion. But it will turn out that we probably will not even have the statisticians there in the future to tell us whether or not the sustainability has worked because their posts will be cut as well. Is this not an irony and a risk? Does the Minister not agree that he should rethink this critical department and its staffing? Not only do we have concerns about it but certainly also the business community, the Chamber of Commerce, have voiced their concerns too.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I recognise that the party opposite do not want to make any changes to government. They do not want to make any efficiencies.

[11:00]

They do not want to transform government to make it fit for the future. They want to continue to spend, spend, spend without any reprioritisation and tax, tax, tax. This is not ...

Deputy M. Tadier:

I think we need a point of order.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

This is not what this Government is ... is it a point of order?

Deputy M. Tadier:

I think it is a point of order.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Okay, I shall sit down.

Deputy M. Tadier:

I do not think the Chief Minister... while I am sure some robust banter is allowed, he cannot put words into the mouths of Reform Jersey which are not true, saying that we do not want to see any changes to government. Quite clearly we do and there are changes that we would quite happily make. So, I would ask the Chief Minister to not misrepresent us.

The Bailiff:

I am not sure that is a point of order, Deputy. I rather take the view this is robust political exchanges and at this stage I would not be minded to intervene. Deputy Rondel. I am sorry, Deputy Labey.

3.11.6 Deputy R. Labey:

Easy mistake, Sir. Thank you. **[Laughter]** He is a very good-looking man. **[Laughter]** Is the fact that the reform of the administration and management of the public sector seems to be torture and failing due to the fact that senior officers are paid on the Hay scale which rewards them for the amount of people working under them?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Absolutely not. It is difficult when you have got a Ship of State and you have got a department structure. I have said right from the start that changing the culture, getting people to work more closely together and work more efficiently is difficult work, as it is in any single organisation. But we have got staff who are committed to it, they are delivering on it and Members will see, I think, an M.T.F.P. with proposals that they can support. Of course, the Hay evaluation takes as part of its factoring a number of staff but that is not the sole factoring and it is not the majority of the weighting.

3.11.7 Deputy G.P. Southern:

I will return to the topic of the statistics and the unit and the potential cuts. One of the things, as the Minister will agree, I am sure, is that the Statistics Unit must be seen to be and be rigorously independent. It is no use saying: "Let us roll them in with another group of advisers." That is not their function. Will the Minister reconsider any proposal that comes on his desk to cut posts in the Statistics Unit?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I have tried to say it politely throughout the answering of these questions, there are proposals that are being considered and the Deputy, I am afraid, will have to wait until the 30th until he sees the shape and form of those proposals but I hope those proposals when he sees them he will be able to support them.