

6. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Chief Minister

The Bailiff:

Very well. I am afraid that brings questions to the Minister to a close so we now move on to questions to the Chief Minister.

6.1 The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

Will the Chief Minister advise the Assembly how many items of legislation will be lodged for debate before the end of this session?

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

I do not have the actual number in front of me. As the Connétable will know, there are a number of pieces of legislation which are nearing completion and ready for lodging and we had quite a long discussion at the Corporate Services Scrutiny Panel about it, but certainly I think it was intended that the note of the proposed legislation will be issued to the Scrutiny Panel and I can ensure that that is done.

6.1.1 The Connétable of St. Lawrence:

I wonder if that information could be passed to all Members so that they are aware of exactly what to expect, the work that will be needed before the end of the session. That is my question to the Chief Minister.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I have got no problem with that. There are no surprises but there are lots of pieces of work which need to be brought to completion, I hope, before the end of this parliamentary term.

6.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Could the Chief Minister state why in his report accompanying the Interim Population Policy there is no mention whatsoever of the Jersey Household Projections 2013 release, which was available at the time, and indicates serious demand from his solution to population for housing in the Island?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The Deputy seems to keep wishing to bring together long-term population issues with short-term population issues and he has done that in a number of questions today. The Interim Population Policy is for a number of – 2 - years, allowing that limited number of migration for 2 years. As he well knows, housing qualifications and therefore ability to buy are not developed and not granted within a 2-year period.

6.2.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Does the Minister not accept then that by 2016, in the very short term, as a consequence of his proposed policy, population will breach the 100,000 mark which is still the target to end up at 102,000 approximately?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Members will be aware that the Deputy himself has lodged an amendment to the Interim Population Policy this morning and I could say the same with regard to his amendment.

6.3 Deputy S. Pinel:

As Members will probably be aware, I am not a fan of repetition. However, I will ask the same question of the Chief Minister as his department is responsible for the Charities Law.

Does the Chief Minister accept that the delivery of a disability strategy in 2016 is delaying this important piece of work for too long and could not the funding estimated to be approximately £80,000 not be found to progress a disability strategy sooner?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Yes, I do and, as the Minister for Health and Social Security indicated, there is political support for bringing forward this matter. She was right to raise the constraints on her budget and she is right in saying that her budget is limited and it would be difficult for her to fund this. I spoke with my Assistant Minister about this only yesterday afternoon and we agreed that it is important to bring it forward and make sure it is brought forward in a timely manner and I and he instructed our officers to make sure that they could find the funding from within the existing central policy in the budget to bring this work forward and my Assistant Minister will be writing to relevant - I use the term "third sector": I know it is not used any more - representatives to inform them of this fact.

6.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Will the Chief Minister advise whether his department had any involvement or contact with Google and their decision to take down former Senator Syvret's blog site?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

As I understand it, that action arose directly from the judgment of the court and actions arising from that, not from my department.

6.4.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

Is the Chief Minister aware that the reasons given for the taking down of the site were due to defamation yet the court case was to do with data protection and in his role as Chief Minister with an overarching responsibility for the Island and its welfare, does he agree that freedom of expression is something which is very important and this is something which any advocates of freedom of expression should be concerned about?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Freedom of expression is important and I do not wish to tread on to legal interpretation of that, particularly in relation to the European Convention on Human Rights, but the Deputy should be aware, and I am sure is aware, that Google themselves have a policy around the using of its facility blogger, which is its blogging software, around bullying and harassment.

6.5 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

I wish to ask the Chief Minister a question around the shortage of social housing really as a follow-on from a question this morning Does the Chief Minister believe that in light of the fact that we have 700 families currently waiting for homes, that really we should be doing more on the Jersey College for Girls' site? From my reckoning - I have done a quick reckoning on the figures - and I think there is a shortfall of at least between 100 and 150 homes in the next 4 or 5 years taking into consideration all the sites that have been put forward and I want to know whether the Chief Minister believes that is acceptable when we have a site which is in States ownership and waiting to go. So I would like to know what he thinks about that and whether he will take it back and they will look at the figures again with regard to social housing on the Girls' College site.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not think I have got anything to add to the answer that the Assistant Minister for Treasury and Resources gave earlier. We have already looked at it again to see if we could

increase the provision of social housing on that site. These sites have got to be taken in the round, as the Assistant Minister said. The Minister for Housing is also looking at increasing density on other States-owned sites as well and that is why also when we come to the debate to the amendment to the Island Plan, it is important that this Assembly accepts those amendments so that we can provide for the demand.

6.5.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

Can the Chief Minister say why they will not increase the amount of social housing on the Girls' College site? I want to know why.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not have all the details in front of me but I am sure that we can provide those to the Deputy. If I recall correctly, and it is a number of weeks if not months since I last considered this, we have already increased it from the initial intention anyway because we were concerned, as she was concerned, about the provision of social housing but we are quite happy to provide the details to her.

Deputy J.A. Hilton:

I would suggest the reason it has not been increased is because it does not wash its face financially and basically ...

The Bailiff:

Deputy, you have asked 2 and you are not really free to make a statement.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Sir, if I could just clarify. As I said, it has been increased.

6.6 Deputy T.A. Vallois:

Could the Chief Minister advise the Assembly what his intentions would be should P.P.C. (Privileges and Procedures Committee) decide not to bring forward changes to the Machinery of Government that is due to come forward before the end of this session?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I would hope that P.P.C. would bring it forward. It would seem slightly strange. P.P.C. initiated and set up the Machinery of Government sub-group. They, as far as I am aware, accepted those proposals. They proposed an in-committee debate and even went as far as to set up an Oversight Group to ensure that they were brought forward and brought to this Assembly for consideration so I would expect that P.P.C. would do just that.

Deputy T.A. Vallois:

But my question was if they were not to bring something forward, what would his intentions be?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I hope that they would. This has been a joint approach. We have developed it together, as the President knows, and it is important that we leave behind this term of office a better more effective and efficient system of government, and that is what those changes, I believe, deliver. If P.P.C. decides they are not going to bring them forward, although I see no reason why they should not, considering they accepted them only some short months ago, then I would have to consider as Chief Minister whether I would bring them forward.

6.7 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Following on from Deputy Tadier's question, can the Chief Minister give assurances that no States department has been involved in trying to shut down Senator Syvret's blog because the evidence is that it goes back to 2008, well before the recent court cases, and also well before any sort of charges or court cases were brought against him. Can the Chief Minister give assurances that no States department, and if he has knowledge of the Law Officers' Department and others as well, has been involved in trying to shut down the blog since 2008?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I cannot speak of the history since 2008 because I have not been involved directly since that time. If by reference to States departments the Deputy might be referring to the Law Officers' Department or the Data Protection Section, then I suspect that they have been involved, although I cannot absolutely confirm that.

6.7.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can the Chief Minister give an undertaking to the Assembly that he will ask departments if they have had any involvement and publish the information so that all Members can be aware of what they did and when?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

The judgment of the court is quite clear and I have referred to it on many occasions, and it is straightforward and actions have arisen from that court judgment. I do not think there is any need to go over that ground again and publish timelines. The court has considered the issue. They have made their findings very clear and other actions have arisen from that judgment.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

The Chief Minister, I think, is obscuring the situation. I asked from 2008 which predates the court actions and predates any court orders and so on. I would like to know if there is an attempt to try and muzzle free speech in this Island by civil servants and it has been going on, we know it has, since 2008.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I am not sure why the Deputy wishes that information. I have made it quite clear Google themselves have a code of practice for bullying and harassment and they are the ones that, as I understand it, taken down this particular website.

6.8 Senator L.J. Farnham:

Following Senator Ozouf's trip to New Jersey, I wonder if the Chief Minister thinks the ties with New Jersey are indeed valuable to the Island and whether he considers developing those links is a worthwhile cause.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Can I start by thanking Senator Ozouf for taking the trip at his own expense and in his own vacation time? **[Approval]** I could not agree more with the thrust of the questioner. I think that these are extremely valuable links. It is important that we build relationships with all G20 countries of which obviously the U.S.A. (United States of America) is a very important international country and we should build on those relationships. I believe that this 350th anniversary gives a very important event upon which we can build those relationships and, as you well know, it was the subject of a meeting and discussion earlier this morning and officers will be going away to develop a programme of activity which I hope will involve both further visits to New Jersey and visits from New Jersey to Jersey. It is important that we acknowledge and celebrate our past because it will help us to consider our future.

[12:00

6.9 Deputy M. Tadier:

Can the Chief Minister tell the Assembly that he has been made aware that P.P.C. no longer supports the key recommendations that are found within the Machinery of Government Review and also acknowledge the fact that the Machinery of Government Review report was substantially cherry-picked and therefore the position cannot simply be expected to be rubberstamped by the committee?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I wonder if the Deputy Chairman of P.P.C. is trying to tell me something across the floor of this Assembly. I am not aware of what he has just indicated to me. Perhaps he would like to inform the Assembly that that is the position that P.P.C. have now taken despite the fact that only some weeks ago they approved those recommendations and they brought them to this Assembly for an in-committee debate so that we could then go away and give effect to them.

6.9.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

I understood that the move to Ministerial system was supposed to enhance and speed up communications between panels and the Ministerial side. That does not seem to be the case. I was genuinely asking because I thought the Chief Minister was aware and abreast of current local events. This does not seem to be the case so I will simply wait for the cogs of the wheel to turn and I am sure that the relevant information will be brought out publicly shortly.

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I can only assume then that this is a reversion back to the old committee system approach. The committee meets and nobody quite knows what it has decided.

6.10 Deputy G.P. Southern:

On the basis that Back-Benchers ask questions and that Chief Ministers answer them, will the Chief Minister attempt an answer instead of the facetious one he gave earlier as to why there is no mention of the Jersey Household Projections 2013 in the 2014 proposals for population?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

It was not the answer of the type indicated by the Deputy. It was a serious answer. We are talking about an interim population policy and the Deputy is trying to deliver the long-term policy in the interim and this is the very reason why the Council of Ministers brought forward an interim population policy so that the concerns that the Deputy rightly raises, the long-term issues, are considered in an appropriate fashion.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Why is there no mention of the household projections, a vital factor in population, in the Chief Minister's population report? Why not?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I indicated that in my earlier answer with regard to the 2-year period and that is not a period in which one is granted the right to purchase within our community.