

4. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Chief Minister

4.1 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

I would like to thank the Chief Minister for his response to my written question on employee suspensions, but having looked at the response, I would like to know from him the issue of delay in dealing with suspensions due to employees being off sick. It seems to be paramount in his response and I wonder how that is being dealt with. Will the Minister explain?

Senator F.H. Walker (The Chief Minister):

The new measures introduced earlier this year have made a considerable difference to the length of time and the whole discipline basically surrounding suspensions. There are still some issues which the States Employment Board wish to pursue further and the question of suspension and illness is one of those that we are looking at actively.

4.2 Senator B.E. Shenton:

Does the Chief Minister consider that he has enough power to carry out his role? **[Laughter]**

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir, but I could always do with more.

4.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Could the Chief Minister state the reasons that underlie his decision not to grant Jersey Dairy a Public Policy Exemption, as recommended in Scrutiny Report 4 of this year, with which he was in broad agreement?

Senator F.H. Walker:

The decision has been taken in conjunction with the board of the Jersey Dairy because at this point a P.P.E. (Public Policy Exemption) is totally unnecessary. Should it become necessary to protect the dairy industry during a period of transition, I would have no hesitation whatsoever in issuing one, but it is totally unnecessary at this point because there is no threat from the J.C.R.A. (Jersey Competition Regulatory Authority) to the industry at this juncture.

4.4 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

With regard to the dairy industry, the response of the Chief Minister's Department is still awaited to the Scrutiny report, but would he tell me how he believes one can reconcile retaining a dairy that needs certain monopolistic powers to operate to retain its market mass, so to speak, and yet opening it up to competition? How does he intend to square that?

Senator F.H. Walker:

This is an extremely balance - as the Deputy who was a member of the Scrutiny sub panel well knows - to achieve, but we are in very constructive talks with all the players in the industry and are hopeful of a solution to which all significant members of the industry will be able to sign up. I am hopeful a solution will be forthcoming within a matter of a few weeks.

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

In response to your question to me by the Director of Human Resources, I had asked what the States' policy was in connection with employment opportunities for people with learning disabilities. I was informed that the States of Jersey do not have a policy. Can the Chief Minister confirm that he will look into this and bring a policy back to the States for people with learning difficulties?

Senator F.H. Walker:

I can confirm this is already being looked into and my Assistant Minister, Deputy Gorst, has been active in this respect now for some time. It is very much our view that the States should have a proactive and easily accessible employment policy to those with learning difficulties and that is exactly the aim that we are working towards.

4.6 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

I was dissatisfied with the answer on the dairy. I wonder if the Chief Minister could tell us (a) where he stands on this particular issue and (b) how he reconciles moving from an operator who needs some elements of monopoly to one who is going to be exposed to the full force of competition?

Senator F.H. Walker:

There is general agreement - and I can only assume that the Deputy is no longer up-to-date with the movement in the dairy industry - that the way forward is a producer-owned, if you like, business. What my team are doing is working with the producers, with the board of the dairy and others towards achieving that objective in such a way that we prevent a turf war or a disastrous split in the industry which could merely open the gates then to external competition to the detriment of all. We are looking for a joined-up solution here and at this time I am confident that we will achieve one, although I can give no guarantees.

4.7 Deputy P.N. Troy:

Can I ask the Chief Minister, following the election of a new Chief Minister in Guernsey and a new cabinet, can he advise what steps he has taken to organise a meeting to progress relations between our 2 Islands?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir, I can indeed. I telephoned the new Guernsey Chief Minister within hours of his appointment. I have subsequently followed that up with a letter and we have agreed that I will be going to Guernsey within the next few weeks - I do not have a date as yet - but within the next few weeks to hold the first meeting with him. I do not anticipate that there is going to be any problem here at all because we are both committed to the Islands working together as closely as possible and I anticipate a productive meeting when I go over.

4.8 Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

As a result of the visit to the French idyllic island last weekend, would the Chief Minister tell us whether it was indeed the case that the Cherbourg-Jersey freight link was confirmed at that meeting and could he give us a date as to when it will come in?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Sorry, Sir, I missed that.

Deputy R.G. Le Hérissier:

Could the Chief Minister, Sir, tell us whether at the meeting with the French or the Normandy authorities, as appeared in the press, an agreement was announced on the start-up of the Jersey-Cherbourg freight service and, if so, when will it start?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Well, Sir, no agreement was necessary between the Conseil Général de la Manche or the States of Jersey because a private company is intending to start that service imminently. Both the Conseil General and the Economic Development Minister and his team and mine are supportive of this private sector initiative. There are no barriers to its commencement and, as I have said, we anticipate seeing the first service start imminently.

4.9 Deputy J.A Hilton:

Can the Chief Minister confirm the commitment of the Council of Ministers in delivering the town park, as agreed by the States, in approving the Strategic Plan?

Senator F.H. Walker:

Yes, Sir, I can confirm that commitment. Sadly though, as the Deputy is only too well aware because she has been working very hard to deliver the town park, there remain issues with contamination and there remain issues, which are within our ability to resolve and they must be resolved, in terms of providing alternative parking spaces in an area reasonably adjacent to the park. But as I think the Deputy would herself agree, every effort is being made to deliver the town park as soon as possible and the commitment remains to do so.

4.10 Deputy D.W. Mezbourian:

I regret having to ask this question yet again of the Chief Minister, but I wonder whether he will undertake to deliver the report on ethical investments to the House within the next few weeks, please? He did assure us at the end of last year that we would have it shortly, but there appears to have been no sign of it yet.

Senator F.H. Walker:

If I am looking slightly surprised it is because I was firmly under the impression that the report had been produced some time ago, but clearly that may not be the case. In any event I will absolutely commit to ensure that it is without any further undue delay but I really thought it had been produced. But, yes, if it has not it will be.

The Bailiff:

If there are no further questions for the Chief Minister, we will draw the oral questioning to a close.