

2019.10.22

13 Deputy J.H. Perchard of the Chief Minister regarding the policy of the Government of Jersey in relation to population growth: (OQ.251/2019)

To what maximum size is the Government of Jersey willing to let the population grow, irrespective of the means of growth?

Senator J.A.N. Le Fondré:

The Connétable of St. John is taking this question.

Connétable C.H. Taylor of St. John (Assistant Chief Minister - *rapporteur*):

I thank the Deputy for the question. The Migration Policy Development Board is working hard on developing its recommendations for new migration controls and I am well aware of the complex issues surrounding this question. Population growth has been associated with strong economic and increased prosperity over the last 75 years. At the same time, the negative pressures on the environment and our natural resources have also increased. My Board has been charged with reporting back to the Chief Minister on ways to improve migration controls and we are on track to do that by the end of this year. The Board has approved an interim report on its work and this is being published later this week. Ultimately, this question will be answered by this States Assembly, because the whole debate has to be agreed by this Assembly on the level of migration.

3.13.1 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

Assumedly, when in a position of leadership, one is led by a clear vision and the policy underpinning that vision is what comes second to developing that view. Is it the case that the Migration Policy Development Board has a clear vision for the population size and the future population size of Jersey, or is the process it is undergoing a reactive process and therefore not being led by a clear vision of what it aspires to in terms of population size?

The Connétable of St. John:

A clear vision is acquired by research and knowing the facts. We are, therefore, researching it so that we are fully knowledgeable of the facts and then, hopefully, we will have a clear vision. The duty of my Board is to report to the Chief Minister. The Chief Minister will then decide on how to react and will bring his proposals to this Assembly for this Assembly to decide.

3.13.2 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I have a number of questions all related to the same thing. I am not sure what the Constable's title is, anyway the point is that when did they start the work on population, when are they planning on reporting back to the Chief Minister and coming to the States on it? Because, while they are delaying, and we know the issues, they have been around for a long time, the population is increasing month by month, year by year and I just feel that the Minister, or Ministers, are delaying this matter because they know it is not going to be palatable, it is going to be a major debate and we need to get answers shortly, before the population rises too much, before we finalise the Government Plan.

The Connétable of St. John:

I understand the Deputy's frustration. We are not going to make kneejerk reactions, because that is the worst policy of all. We are looking into the problem of migration in as greater depth as

necessary, so that we can come forward with a clear vision that is beneficial to the whole Island. It will be a decision of this Assembly as to how we go forward.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

I asked when they started their deliberations and when they expect to finish.

The Connétable of St. John:

Sorry, all that information is online. I believe our first meeting was in April of this year.

3.13.3 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Assistant Chief Minister believe that, while it is important to talk about numbers, it is better to have 130,000 inhabitants all living sustainably, rather than the current population of, let us say, 110,000 maybe not living so sustainably?

The Connétable of St. John:

The Deputy is trying to put words in my mouth, but I know what he is saying. It is important that whatever population we have is sustainable one way, or another. At the moment we have a very vibrant economy and there is an enormous demand for additional jobs.

[11:15]

But we have to counter that with the environment and the other aspects of the Island, so that we are - and I do not like overusing the word - but we are sustainable.

3.13.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

With that in mind, does he also believe that the Island Plan will be critical in making sure that, whatever population we have in Jersey, we will adequately house and that the infrastructure is there; that green spaces are preserved, but also that housing is shared equitably throughout the Island if we are to see the population increasing?

The Connétable of St. John:

The Island Plan is integral to whatever results this Assembly agrees on for migration and, therefore, it is very important. Housing whoever comes to live on the Island into our future is a primary concern and that is something that will have to be addressed by the Island Plan. But what is important is that we have a clear pathway, so we know what the demand is and that demand can be met.

3.13.5 Deputy G.P. Southern:

To what extent are his Board's recommendations dependent upon extremely thin data now on estimates of population and to what extent will his Board's findings be on processing a new census to get accurate figures of where we are?

The Connétable of St. John:

We are very fortunate on this Island in that, when we carry out a census, it is highly accurate. We are also very fortunate in that we have many ways of measuring how many people subsequently are on this Island and having a census every 10 years is sufficient. We are not going to be wildly out. We may be 200 or 300 out, or possibly even 500; I would not know, I am purely guessing. But we do have figures that are sufficiently accurate to base policies going forward.

3.13.6 Deputy G.P. Southern:

When the Assistant Minister uses the words “sufficiently accurate” what advice has he taken from the Stats Department on the accuracy of those figures, which are now a long way out of date?

The Connétable of St. John:

Figures that are a long way out of date does not mean that they are inaccurate. The Statistics Unit have addressed our Board. They have given us the methodology behind working out what population figures are using a number - not just one, but a number - of areas that feed into their data. I was highly impressed myself personally and I think the rest of the Board were, so that is why I am confident that the figures they give us are accurate.

Deputy G.P. Southern:

Will those figures be available in the interim report shortly?

The Connétable of St. John:

I am not sure. There are a lot of figures in the report, but whether those actual figures are in the report ... but the population figures are certainly in there.

3.13.7 Deputy G.J. Truscott of St. Brelade:

I do look forward to the interim report coming forward and plainly you have been considering in depth, which is important as well to look at the implications for business in the Island going forward. I think my main concern is currently we have a system and there is a degree of control inasmuch as we have 5,000 people working through the system with a registered scheme and then going on to live permanently in the Island after 10 years. But is it not important to take total control of the situation to stop this conveyor belt and then start choosing the type of trades and people that we want to come into the Island? Does the Constable agree?

The Connétable of St. John:

I entirely agree with that. It is not a matter so much of numbers and figures, it is a matter of having the right controls and the right levers to ensure that the population is sufficiently employed in the right areas and that we do not create inflation and create other unexpected consequences. But it is important that we have control and that is what we do not have at the moment.

3.13.8 Deputy J.H. Perchard:

I am not really sure how long a problem has to be discussed before a policy is no longer deemed a kneejerk reaction. Is it the Government’s view that the population should be allowed to grow infinitely? If not, could the Assistant Minister please answer the question originally posed?

The Connétable of St. John:

I think we all agree in this Assembly and I think many people outside the Assembly, we do not want to be like Hong Kong. But, to put a figure on something when we have not finished our research is something I cannot do and, besides, whatever that figure might be would be agreed by this Assembly and I cannot prejudge the decisions of this Assembly.

Deputy J.H. Perchard:

I am sorry, Sir, can I clarify? Was that a no, the Government is not in favour of infinite population growth?

The Connétable of St. John:

I am not in favour of infinite growth. I cannot answer for others.