

5. Questions to Ministers Without Notice - The Chief Minister

5.1 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

Would the Chief Minister join with me in sending out a message of support to H.G. who apparently is living rough on the streets of London, basically because she complained about being abused, and perhaps through his officers make an approach to say: "Get in touch and we will do whatever we can to help" because at the moment that young woman is getting in touch with people just via an internet café? It is really quite appalling and I do hope the Minister feels he can act.

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

As I said in my statement when the report was initially published, I join, and I think the Deputy says these sentiments, in saying how saddened we are that a young lady suffered while she was living in our community. The Deputy went on to ask me whether I personally would intervene. It is my understanding that the church is attempting to offer support for that individual currently, and therefore I do not think it is for me to intervene.

5.2 Senator L.J. Farnham:

I promise my last word on the referendum for now. Would the Chief Minister agree that the Greffier and his staff should be congratulated on the way they ran the referendum, and although they cannot be held to account for the result, I think they should be thanked for all their efforts?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I absolutely agree with the Senator. All those involved in ensuring that there was good order and people were able to vote on the day of the referendum must be congratulated, but of course we know that the lion share of getting of the work and getting us to where we are today fell to the Greffier and his office, and I am grateful for their work on our behalf.

5.3 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Following the call from the Minister for Treasury and Resources for projects on which he can spend up to, I believe, £50 million by way of fiscal stimulus, does the Minister accept that the simplest way of getting money into the economy is to pay the public sector a proper rate and will he reconsider his offer for 2012 to public sector workers in the light of the need for fiscal stimulus and keeping the economy going?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

There are many questions there. I am not sure whether I need to repeat the "no" that I am giving to them, or if I simply say: "No". As the Deputy knows, the pay round has been very difficult and this Assembly has asked for the States Employment Board to ensure pay restraint. We have done that. We believe that the offer before States employees is fair, albeit we acknowledge that it has not been easy. But at the same time this Government is committed to stimulating the economy and I support the words of the Minister for Treasury and Resources.

5.3.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, if I may. Would the Minister reconsider his position as a matter of urgency, before we see strike ballots in action again in this Island, which is going to happen very shortly?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I hope that that is not the case because I do not believe that that is the right course of action. As I have explained on many occasions, the States Employment Board recognises the difficulty of the current economic climate and the difficulties that it places upon staff but at the same time it recognises that we need to have pay restraint right across the economy, and that includes States

employees. Having said that of course, the offer on the table included a 4% rise in 2014, and we are not many months away from now that rise.

5.4 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Does the Chief Minister share the view of many Islanders that question time has become increasingly questions without answers? If I give an example, a written question 5 to the Chief Minister today, I asked him to outline - again to do with data protection - but how many times in each year since 2005 to the present, the Data Protection Commissioner has been requested to provide assistance or is granted assistance under Article 53 of the Data Protection (Jersey) Law? The answer I get is: "Work is being carried out to provide a full answer to this detailed question, given that there is a potential for some of the information requested to be subject of a court case." Maybe one case, what about all the others? We are talking about 8 years here. There have not been that many cases over 8 years, why avoid the question? My final question is: does he believe that evasion on the part of Ministers does nothing to the standing of this Assembly, to politics or democracy?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I do not agree with the premise of the Deputy's question. There is not evasion on the part of Ministers. I could quite easily have written an evasive answer to that question. I chose not to. I chose to answer it appropriately and fairly, and that is that it will take time to collate that information. I need to have a full understanding of information being provided before I submit it to this Assembly, and therefore I believe that the Deputy should accept that that is what I have instructed and requested my officers to do, and that is the answer that he will get in due course. Just because he simply asks a question and expects it to be easily answerable in the timescale required for detailed written questions, that is not always the case. As he himself said, he is asking for information going back over 8 years, which is not available at the touch of a button.

5.5 Deputy M. Tadier:

Will the Chief Minister advise whether he has been engaging with the House of Commons Justice Committee which is looking at the relationships with the Crown Dependencies, and if so in which way he has been engaging?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Staff in my department liaise very frequently with the Ministry of Justice, and they have engaged with the Justice Select Committee, and in due course I would expect to be making a submission to that committee, and I also hope that the chairman of the committee will, during the course of the review, be able to find time to visit Jersey in person.

5.5.1 Deputy M. Tadier:

Following that up, of course I think the deadline finishes quickly. If the committee are invited over to Jersey, will the Chief Minister make sure that States Members are able to speak to them and that any members of the public who have concerns, perhaps specifically relating to good government in the Crown Dependencies, either positively or not positively, may be allowed to approach that forum so that they can hear not simply from the political elites in Jersey, who may think that everything is running in a particular way, but from the grassroots public of Jersey?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

As I understand it, a call for evidence and the work that particular Select Committee is in the public domain and any member of the public, be it across the Channel Islands, the Isle of Man or the United Kingdom, can submit to that committee in the same way that we see individuals submitting to our own Scrutiny Committees. Therefore they have that ability. I would not wish to describe any submission that I might make as Chief Minister in the terms that the Deputy has

described it. The office that I hold is a democratically elected office and I serve at the pleasure of this Assembly, and I make comments from that position.

5.6 Deputy S. Pitman:

Could the Minister tell Members what message it puts across to our public employees that year on year we have underspends, and year on year we have pay freezes? What message does he think that sends out to our public employees?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

As far as I am aware the only pay freeze that States employees have taken is a freeze for 6 months. That position was changed by the previous Government, and a pay rise was provided. As I have said earlier, the current pay round has been difficult but for 2012 a 1% non consolidated pay award was offered, for 2013, it is 1% consolidated and 1 per cent non consolidated and, as I said, for 2014 it is 14%. That is not a pay freeze. With regard to underspends, we know that we budget and project income in a very cautious and conservative manner and I believe that is absolutely right. We can sometimes get obsessed with budgets but coming from my profession I am more interested in the actual spend than I am in budget, and therefore if departments are managing to spend under their budget I think that is a positive thing, and with the advent of 3-year spending I believe that departments are going to be able to manage their budget in an even more effective way.

The Bailiff:

The Deputy of St. John has indicated to ask a question. I do not usually let Ministers ask questions of other Ministers.

The Deputy of St. John:

It has been covered, Sir.

5.7 Deputy M. Tadier:

Following up from my last question. Can the Chief Minister give an undertaking that if the Select Committee do come to Jersey, that he will organise a forum whereby the public can come in, albeit perhaps for a day, and speak directly to that Select Committee in confidence?

[11:45]

Senator I.J. Gorst:

That would not be appropriate for me to do such a thing. As I indicated, I hope that the Select Committee chairman might pay a visit to the Island but I am far from certain that that will happen. As I said, I will be making a submission, it is open to any Member of this Assembly or the public of Jersey to make a submission. Of course should the chairman make the visit and there are Members of this Assembly that perhaps wish to meet with him informally, I do not for a minute suspect he will be taking formal evidence in a visit to the Island community, then I will see if that can be arranged. But obviously it will be down to the chairman to decide.

Deputy M.R. Higgins:

It is just a point of information. The Select Committee evidence has to be taken by 10th May and any member of the public can put in a 3,000 word submission to them. So I would just like to make it known that everyone can apply by 10th May.

5.8 Deputy J.H. Young:

On the Consolidated Order Paper today we have Community Provisions: restrictive measures Syria, and a piece of legislation being made by the Deputy Chief Minister on behalf of the Chief Minister. Could the Chief Minister confirm that it is normal practice for the lawmaking responsibilities to be delegated to Assistant Ministers?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

That was not delegated to an Assistant Minister. It was delegated to the Deputy Chief Minister in my absence from the Island on a chief ministerial trip to the Middle East, and that is absolute normal practice and covered by Standing Orders in the States of Jersey Law.

5.9 Deputy G.P. Southern:

In his comments on my proposition P.37, the Minister refers to the “greater expense than £20,000” to do a proper inquiry into a possibility of a living wage and talks about an unrealistic timescale. Can he elucidate for Members why such big costs would be there and what he sees as a fair timescale?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

That is a very good question. The Deputy knows, and we have touselled on this issue before in my previous capacity. But if one were to do such a piece of work, one would have to do it properly, thoroughly and robustly and would need, I believe, to employ one of the U.K. (United Kingdom) academic institutions. An institution well known for doing this piece of work would be Loughborough. That I believe would take money and would take time and I am not sure that I see the benefit in undertaking that work anyway.

5.9.1 Deputy G.P. Southern:

Supplementary, if I may? Does the Minister realise that £20,000 would be at the top end of what Scrutiny would need to pay to have serious expertise involved in such a report, and is there some reason why ministerial government costs more than Scrutiny?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

That is not the case at all. If the Deputy, as I am sure he has, has seen the report recently published - I think recently published, I only saw it recently myself, perhaps I was just catching up on reading - with regard to the expense of experts employed by Scrutiny function and I make no comment on it. I believe that Scrutiny is enhanced by the employment of internationally renowned experts and the costs of those experts can, in certain cases, where the subject is complex, be considerable. Therefore, if this piece of work is to be done, as I suggest in my comments, we would need to take appropriate academic research and advice.

The Bailiff

Does any other Member wish to ask a question? Then we bring questions to the Chief Minister to an end. That concludes that and then there are no matters under J or K, so we come to Public Business.