

3.11 Deputy S.Y. Mézec of the Chief Minister regarding the prospect of an independent public inquiry into the sacking of the R.N.L.I. coxswain: [1(654)]

Following comments made to the Assembly by the Assistant Chief Minister, Senator Routier, and a public statement he released in April about the prospect of an independent public inquiry into the sacking of the R.N.L.I. coxswain, what progress, if any, has been made in setting up this inquiry?

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

I ask the Deputy of St. Martin to answer this question, please.

The Deputy of St. Martin (The Minister for the Environment - rapporteur):

Since the time when Assistant Chief Minister Senator Routier was asked by the now former lifeboat crew in April to investigate, we have spent considerable time talking with many people, including the crew representatives, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, Coastguard, the Harbourmaster, Ports of Jersey and many others. We have emphasised to the R.N.L.I. the importance of having a crew with local knowledge at all opportunities. The outcome of our investigations has resulted in acceptance by all parties and all parties recognise that they had had the opportunities to intervene earlier in relations that have now deteriorated over several years. We established that there was a desire to acknowledge and move forward. On that basis, the coxswain was reinstated. As part of this reinstatement, all parties, Government, Ports of Jersey, the crew and the R.N.L.I., agreed that a fresh start would be made and a line drawn under the past. We are extremely disappointed that it has not been possible to move forward on this basis. However, if evidence is presented to Government that merits an independent inquiry, then we will pursue one. For the avoidance of doubt, to date no such evidence has been presented.

3.11.1 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

A supplementary: I take it from that answer that the independent inquiry that was suggested earlier this year has not taken place and, as things currently stand, will not take place. I attended one of the meetings that has been hosted recently by the crew and those who are trying to set up an independent lifeboat service, who indicated that they still felt that there was value in having an independent inquiry and that they felt that it would help the full picture be better recognised, not just by them but by the public. Given this is such an important subject and where I think many people are quite divided on what the solution is, does the Minister think that there is still merit in having this public inquiry? Would he endeavour to propose such a thing?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I am happy to agree with the Deputy. I have said on a couple of occasions in the very recent past exactly what the Deputy has just said. There are a lot of questions unanswered. People come to me and I know other politicians are asking questions. The answers are not forthcoming and maybe it is time that this evidence was put in the public domain. Quite what the title of the public inquiry will be I do not know. I have very little evidence to put forward to whoever runs that public inquiry and I think I will have to investigate further. Certainly, in answer to the Deputy's question, I absolutely agree. It is time we had some answers to many of these questions and I will see what I can do to bring that forward.

3.11.2 Deputy G.P. Southern:

It appears to me that the Minister has got things completely the wrong way round. He is saying bring forward some evidence and we will hold an inquiry. Surely it is an inquiry that brings

forward the evidence and examines it. Is that not the correct way round when dealing with an inquiry?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I have to say to the Assembly we have had 2 sorts of inquiries already in this case. There was the situation where the coxswain was suspended. There was an inquiry into that and the outcome of that inquiry eventually was the coxswain being reinstated. I know that the coxswain has asked for a record of that inquiry and he has received a redacted record. Members may know that he has now asked for the unredacted record but has been told that the institution have acted legally and they are not in a position to give him an unredacted record. I believe he is potentially pursuing that in other directions, and I have spoken to him about that on a number of occasions. I am not aware that that is moving forward. The second inquiry that has taken place was into an employee of Ports of Jersey. Again, this was a complaint that came from the ex-coxswain. That inquiry took place and was found that there was not any merit in it. Again, the coxswain had a meeting with the chief executive of Ports and that message was conveyed to him. So, we have had 2 inquiries thus far and I would like to see some more evidence to move forward. Again, I will take the sentiment of the Assembly on board and go away and see what I can do.

3.11.3 Senator S.C. Ferguson:

I know that the Minister is calling for evidence, but unfortunately the evidence is either redacted or unavailable because of freedom of information restrictions with organisations such as Ports. I think what people are asking for is a copy of the investigation by the R.N.L.I. and an investigation of the part played by employees of Ports, which is not available. Perhaps the Minister would like to consider this and perhaps talk to the chief executive of Ports and the board.

The Deputy of St. Martin:

Certainly, I am happy to do that. I do wonder if I will face a similar situation where a report may not be released to me. This was an internal inquiry. But I will take the Senator's sentiments away and see what I can do.

3.11.4 Deputy R. Labey:

I get that the Minister is promoting what seems to be the party line from the Council of Ministers that the focus is on getting a lifeboat up and running as soon as possible back out of St. Helier. But what about the focus on support and gratitude and honouring the work of Coxswain Hibbs and his crew? Because the public of Jersey seem to feel that the Council of Ministers are working in cahoots with Ports of Jersey and cutting the old life crew adrift.

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I can only reiterate what I have said to the Assembly in the past. The priority at the moment is to get lifeboats back in St. Helier.

[15:45]

I receive daily emails about the risks to mariners around our shores and the risks of not having an all-weather lifeboat in St. Helier. While the Harbourmaster is satisfied that while this is greater than it was; it is still manageable and we are doing everything we can to get that situation remedied. I have never had anything but complete admiration for the coxswain and his crew for going to sea in all sorts of appalling weather in the past and I have never ever said anything other than that. This is a relationship matter between the crew and the Royal National Life Boat Institution and, as I said in my original answer, we agreed some time ago now that

situations, which could have been handled differently some years back, were not, and things have deteriorated since that point. But I can only say to the Deputy, at no time ever have they questioned the bravery and integrity of the crew and the coxswain in going to sea on our behalf to save people at sea has ever been in dispute.

3.11.5 The Deputy of St. John:

I would like to thank the Minister for providing a briefing to States Members last week. But I will reiterate my concerns now as to what I reiterated at that briefing. My view is that there needs to be absolute openness and transparency around this and our responsibility as a States Assembly or your responsibility as a Government in terms of holding Ports of Jersey to account to ensure appropriate conduct. I think openness and transparency in that matter is absolutely vital. So would the Minister ensure that any review, anything that happens with regards to holding to account the Ports of Jersey, is done in an open transparent manner so that everybody can see exactly the facts of what has happened in this case and everyone can have light of all sides of the story?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I am not sure that I am in a position today to say to the Deputy that, yes, absolutely I will do that. But I can certainly guarantee to her that I will go away and do everything within my power to make that happen.

3.11.6 Deputy J.A. Martin:

I thank the Minister as well for his answers, but it is the public and it is about transparency and does the Minister not agree that, from the public and me, as a States Member, this is one of our fourth emergency crew, and if it had been any other, the police, the fire or the ambulance, and they had a dispute and we, or the States under a ministry, had gone out and asked for new volunteers, what would that look like and what does it look like? So this is what I am getting and can the Minister dispel this for me and the rest of the public once and for all because it is basically that is what I feel. Sorry, you did not ... we cannot work out if you were going out and were going to get another crew and you could not do this, as I say, with the police, the fire, or the ambulance. The whole Island would walk out. Does the Minister not agree?

The Deputy of St. Martin:

This is a very different situation where we have at the moment paid employees of the fire, ambulance and police force, but with the institution we have volunteers who are not paid. The institution is a charity, they provide lifeboats to this Island at no cost to us whatsoever. We are in a quite peculiar situation in a way ...

Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Can I just correct the Minister there please? Last year the Life Boat Guild raised something in the order of £496,000 a year, of which something in the order of £200,000 goes to run the Jersey station and the rest of it is paid across to Poole. So I do not think it is fair to quite say that it costs us nothing.

The Deputy of St. Martin:

I am very sorry, but the Senator is not correct in what she has just informed the Assembly. She knows full well that monies that are collected in collecting boxes and donated in that way go to the general funds of the institution. Monies that are in a restricted bank account for the use in Jersey are left in wills ...

Senator S.C. Ferguson:

Sorry, I was talking about the money that is raised. I did not say it went into the specifically Jersey Poole account, it just goes over to the R.N.L.I. account, which is held in Poole.

The Deputy of St. Martin:

Moving on to the initial part of the Senator's question, I did explain to her last week that it is a free service. The institution have stations all around the country and parts of the coast where very, very few people live. Those few people can only donate a very small amount of money, yet they may still have a lifeboat, which costs millions of pounds to buy and hundreds of thousands of pounds to maintain on an annual basis. It is absolutely wrong to say that it is not anything other than a free service. I accept, and I have said this openly, this Island donates massive amounts of money to charities and the institution is no exception. But that is the way it is.

3.11.7 Deputy S.Y. Mézec:

I think from the questions that have been asked in this Chamber and the strength of public feeling, it appears to me that there is an appetite for some sort of inquiry to find out exactly what happened so that we can move on effectively. Could I ask the Minister, when was the last time he spoke specifically about the issue of an inquiry with the former crew and coxswain and, if that was not recently, would he be prepared to speak to them again about this to find out why they feel an inquiry is necessary. He has spoken in previous answers about needing evidence before having an inquiry; well they may well be able to give him that evidence if he is prepared to speak to those. So would he be prepared to have that conversation with them? I am sure that myself and other Members of this Assembly would be more than happy to facilitate that discussion.

The Deputy of St. Martin:

To my best recollection, the last time I mentioned this to the ex-coxswain was probably 2, maybe even 3, weeks ago now in a message where I did say to him that I was not sure if the best way forward now was a public inquiry. I am quite happy to take the message from the Deputy and I will contact the ex-crew and the ex-coxswain again and ask them again if there is any evidence that they can provide, which I can use, and if that is not possible I will continue to pursue a direction of travel as regards a public inquiry.