

STATES OF JERSEY



BLACKBERRIES: COSTS FOR MINISTERS AND ASSISTANT MINISTERS AND USE IN THE ASSEMBLY

**Lodged au Greffe on 29th October 2009
by Deputy T.M. Pitman of St. Helier**

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

THE STATES are asked to decide whether they are of opinion –

- (a) to request the Chief Minister to cease to meet the costs of Blackberries and call charges for all Ministers and Assistant Ministers from the budget of the Chief Minister's Department and instead to reclaim such costs from the relevant member's expenses on a monthly basis;
- (b) to charge the Privileges and Procedures Committee to bring forward for approval the necessary amendments to Standing Orders to ban the use of Blackberries from the States Chamber when the Assembly is meeting.

DEPUTY T.M. PITMAN OF ST. HELIER

REPORT

Paragraph (a)

I feel that I must begin this brief report by making quite clear that since being elected I have never wanted, or felt the need to be given a Blackberry. Nor do I wish to be given a Blackberry now as any kind of ‘sop’ in exchange for dropping this proposition. I can also state quite categorically that I further have no wish to be given a Blackberry – or of even greater importance – have its running cost laid at the feet of the taxpayer in the future. For viewed within the established and accepted terms and conditions, and, indeed, Standing Orders relevant to the role of a States member this would be without justification.

The States of Jersey Law 2005 is quite clear that each and every elected States member must be ‘paid’ the same. This principle was not only agreed by the States itself many years ago, but is a fact supported by the vast majority of the public that I have discussed the matter with. Indeed, this is widely seen as a major safeguard that – without the checks and balances inherent, for example, in the full party political systems in place in most mature democracies – the potential for the buying of political allegiance/votes via the carrot of financial related inducements is kept to a minimum.

Unfortunately, the erosion of this key principle of equality which was begun by sleight of hand during the first 3 years of Ministerial government has now, under the present Chief Minister, begun to be undermined, indeed, abused in a manner that is quite open and blatant. Of course, as we have seen since the very week the Chief Minister announced his nominations for ministerial positions the election pitch of political equality and ‘inclusive’ government has been shown to be nothing more than smoke in the wind. I firmly believe that this increasing contempt for equality and to the taxpayers’ pocket cannot be allowed to continue.

Under former Chief Minister Walker these highly expensive Blackberries were provided only to Ministers. Under his successor Chief Minister Le Sueur, however, this blatant contempt for backbenchers in general, and those who work so hard within Scrutiny in particular have reached a new low with even Assistant Ministers apparently ‘needing’ and receiving these appliances.

As indicated above it is not just the erosion of the principle of equality within the States that is of importance here. Of far more significance still is the highly unpalatable fact that whilst all 53 members are entitled to receive the same expenses allowance my question to the Chief Minister of 20th October 2009 confirms that we now have 18 members of the Executive – both Ministers and Assistant Ministers – for whom the expenses package within which all Scrutiny members and backbenchers must manage to try to work is apparently simply not good enough. They it seems believe that they are somehow an ‘elite’ worth more; and that it is the taxpayer who should pick up the tab. Such a proposition, of course, has never been brought to the Assembly for ratification.

Question

“Will the Chief Minister clarify how many Ministers and Assistant Ministers are currently claiming both their expense allowance and having their Blackberry bills paid; further still, what the total amount of these bills are for the year from December 2008 to October 2009?”

Answer

“I can confirm that eighteen Ministers and Assistant Ministers are claiming both their expense allowance of £3,650 per annum and having their States supplied Blackberry bills paid.

The total amount for the States supplied Blackberry bills for the period December 2008 to October 2009 is £6, 920.51.”

Yes. A total of 18 Ministers and Assistant Ministers appear to think that they merit more than other members; are perhaps superior in some way: possibly (and excuse me while I laugh here) even work harder than those on Scrutiny etc so thus deserve to be able to effectively boost/stretch their expenses allowance by many hundreds – or even potentially thousands if one takes into account the Blackberries themselves which would cost a member a tidy sum if he or she needed to buy the appliance out of their own pocket; not to mention the fact that there appears to have been no limit on bills set by the Chief Minister. No limit even on the type of calls/e-mails that can be taken and sent.

I repeat again: who picks up the tab resulting from the Chief Minister’s contempt for the States of Jersey Law 2005 and, indeed, the same contempt displayed by all of his 18 Ministers and Assistant Ministers happy to go along with this?

The taxpayer does.

Taxpayers including hard-pressed nurses, firemen, manual workers, civil servants, paramedics, prison wardens and teachers who have all, lest we forget, just seen monies voted for and secured by the States Assembly just a year ago whipped off the negotiating table by the States Employment Board and the Council of Ministers with mewling excuses of hard economic times. Really, when one views such crass hypocrisy it is not hard to see why the Council of Ministers are held in ever-increasing contempt.

Am I being too harsh in this assessment? I discussed the matter with a couple of constituents this week upon receiving the answer to my written question outlined above. The view expressed by both was, indeed, a mixture of anger and disgusted resignation at the hypocrisy of the action. This was perhaps best summed up by the following observations –

“Are these people politicians or parasites?”

“They are no better than those MPs in the U.K. caught claiming for things they had no right to. How damned greedy can some people get?”

I believe that I really do not have to say much more. We already have a less than satisfactory system of ‘equality’ in place where Ministers not only have use of an office, support staff and access to stationery, telephones and office equipment – yet can claim the full expenses allowance; where similarly, by the nature of their role the 12 Constables also have access to the above albeit via their parish. It may well be a fact, of course, that many may never make use of these out of principle. However, this is not the issue at hand.

The fact is we already have a hugely flawed system whereby any member not falling into one of the categories indicated above will find that with out even the Westminster option of even a shared office they must choose between seeing the vast majority of their expenses allowance being eaten up by renting an office – or by managing to work from home.

This latest attempt to create a further chasm between Executive and ‘the rest’ must not be allowed to go unchallenged. These monies should be paid back by all of the 18 Ministers and Assistant Ministers involved. Further still, the Chief Minister should publicly apologise to both Assembly and taxpayers for allowing this situation to come about. It displays contempt for both backbencher and public alike.

Paragraph (b)

Following on from the Assembly’s vote on the recent rescindment proposition regarding the public sector pay freeze I was among a group of politicians approached shortly afterward by a gentleman who had observed the debate from the public gallery. A States employee himself, he told us the following.

As a man who worked hard to do his job to the very best of his abilities; and who had also served and fought – putting his life at risk – in Iraq, he was not only disgusted at the States decision to remove the principle of free collective bargaining, but was even more appalled by what he had viewed from up in the gallery. He described this as a significant number of States members who had voted against the proposition not even listening to the argument contained in the speech by the proposer: but who had instead been reading magazines, newspapers – or constantly playing with their Blackberries!

Such observations as I repeat above only confirm the feelings of anger and disgust felt by many backbenchers – myself included – over the past 10 months since the election. All too many of the Council of Ministers and their followers do not make even the pretence of listening to debates when it comes to propositions or amendments brought by most backbenchers. They read newspapers; vanish to the coffee room for ever-increasing lengths of time – immediately upon one or 2 members rising to their feet in some cases. But worst of all many fiddle with their infernal Blackberries incessantly. A fact anyone deciding to watch from the public gallery can see quite clearly; for the complaints of the gentleman I describe above are far from the first.

Any self-respecting politician genuinely committed to democracy and the principle that any debate should be won or lost on the substance of the argument can only be sickened by this ever-worsening trend of contempt displayed by many members of the Executive. Standing Orders are quite clear that the only papers a States member should have on his or her desk are those relating to the business of the Assembly. It is high time that Standing Orders were now brought into the 21st century so that gadgets such as Blackberries are added to that list and as a result banned from the Chamber whilst it is in session.

The States survived quite satisfactorily prior to the development of this technology and the truth is that there really is no justification whatsoever for Blackberries being allowed in the Chamber today. Unless the widely circulated rumours are, indeed, actually based in fact: that some Assistant Ministers really do need instruction on each and every proposition about which way to vote...

I believe that PPC must act to put an end to this highly disrespectful and divisive practice immediately. As such I urge all members who share my view that within the Chamber all attention should be focussed on the debate at hand to vote accordingly. The public really deserve nothing less.

Financial and manpower implications

There are no financial or manpower implications arising from this proposition. Indeed, if Ministers and Assistant Ministers currently hitting the taxpayers' pocket twice were to revert to paying their own bills surplus to the agreed expenses limit from their pocket like backbenchers there would be a significant financial saving.