STATES OF JERSEY

DRAFT ANNUAL BUSINESS PLAN 2010 (P.117/2009): ELEVENTH AMENDMENT

Lodged au Greffe on 8th September 2009
by Deputy T.M. Pitman of St. Helier

STATES GREFFE

PAGE 3, PARAGRAPH (b) –

After the words "withdrawn from the consolidated fund in 2010", insert the words –

> "except that the net revenue expenditure of the Chief Minister's Department shall be decreased by £203,000 by disbanding the Communications Unit".

DEPUTY T.M. PITMAN OF ST. HELIER

REPORT

Given what can only be described as the copious quantities of political 'shroud waving' of the very worst kind by the Council of Ministers (led by the Minister for Treasury and Resources) with regard to the need to make tough decisions on efficiency savings, and to cut back on all superfluous spending, the fact that the Communications Unit has not then been included in those cuts is quite remarkable. Indeed, while much can be said about this 'Unit' – and no doubt will within the debate – I believe it is sufficient at this point to state that this is surely one of the most glaring of failures of the new ministerial era: the Unit's record since its inception is one of complete waste of the better part of a million pounds of taxpayers' money.

Far from serving any legitimate purpose, the Communications Unit has done nothing whatsoever – or very close – to benefit democracy, effective government or the people of Jersey, instead simply primarily functioning to put sugar-coated gloss/spin on the chosen 'angle of the day' being pursued by the Council of Ministers at any given time. Indeed, the fact that the Communications Unit is only available to the Executive and not government as a whole speaks volumes. Many members of the public who follow local politics closely actually jokingly refer to this as the 'Propaganda Unit'. I believe this observation to be fair comment.

For every piece of valuable information about swine flu, for example, there have been a dozen pieces of spin, such as justifications of committing millions of taxpayers' money to the redundant technology of the incinerator; or the waste of millions more in failing to hedge the resultant contract. But regardless, given the abundance of support available to Ministers in terms of their Assistant Ministers and numerous departmental officers, the need for the Communications Unit simply does not exist. Further still, the posts, at substantially higher salaries than the politicians actually taking the important decisions behind the press releases of the Unit, let us not forget, are completely out of kilter with the responsibility of the role.

Anyone doubting the totally superfluous nature of the Communications Unit experiment should simply consider the following facts. Firstly, that backbenchers have no such luxuries to support their work/propositions on behalf of their constituents and the people of the Island – yet manage to do the job. Secondly, 'government' managed quite successfully to get its message across for many decades before the Communications Unit was brought into being.

Put quite starkly, rather than waste more than £200,000 of taxpayers' money on retaining the Communications Unit, if the Council of Ministers' clarion calls for spending cuts are to be taken as seriously as they should – and let us remember here the staggering example of the attempt by the Minister for Health and Social Services, in conjunction with the Chief Minister and Minister for Treasury and Resources, to shut down Grands Vaux Family Centre, despite not one of the three having ever set foot within this crucial project – then the case for keeping the Unit is simply unsustainable. Are they serious about savings – or is this just a game?

£203,000 could, beyond any shadow of doubt, be far better kept within the coffers in readiness to be allocated elsewhere as necessity demands. For example, I was recently the Vice-Chairman of the Scrutiny Sub-Panel charged with investigating the suitability of current services for vulnerable children. It will be quite clear to all members who have read the report and studied the recommendations that, upon debate, there will

likely be ample opportunities for allocating £200,000 of taxpayers' money to a project/strategy that will make a real difference to people's lives.

£203,000 to promote the political doctrine of the Establishment or to dress Ministerial Decisions up to be more palatable to swallow with 'spin' are not amongst these.

Financial and manpower implications

This amendment would lead to a £203,000 saving of taxpayers' money, and I do not believe there are any other financial/manpower implications that would result from disbanding the Communications Unit. The 'work' of the Unit could simply be absorbed by Ministers, their Assistants and departmental officers – in line with practice before the Communications Unit was brought into being.